

THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD



PUTNAM HALL
SERIES

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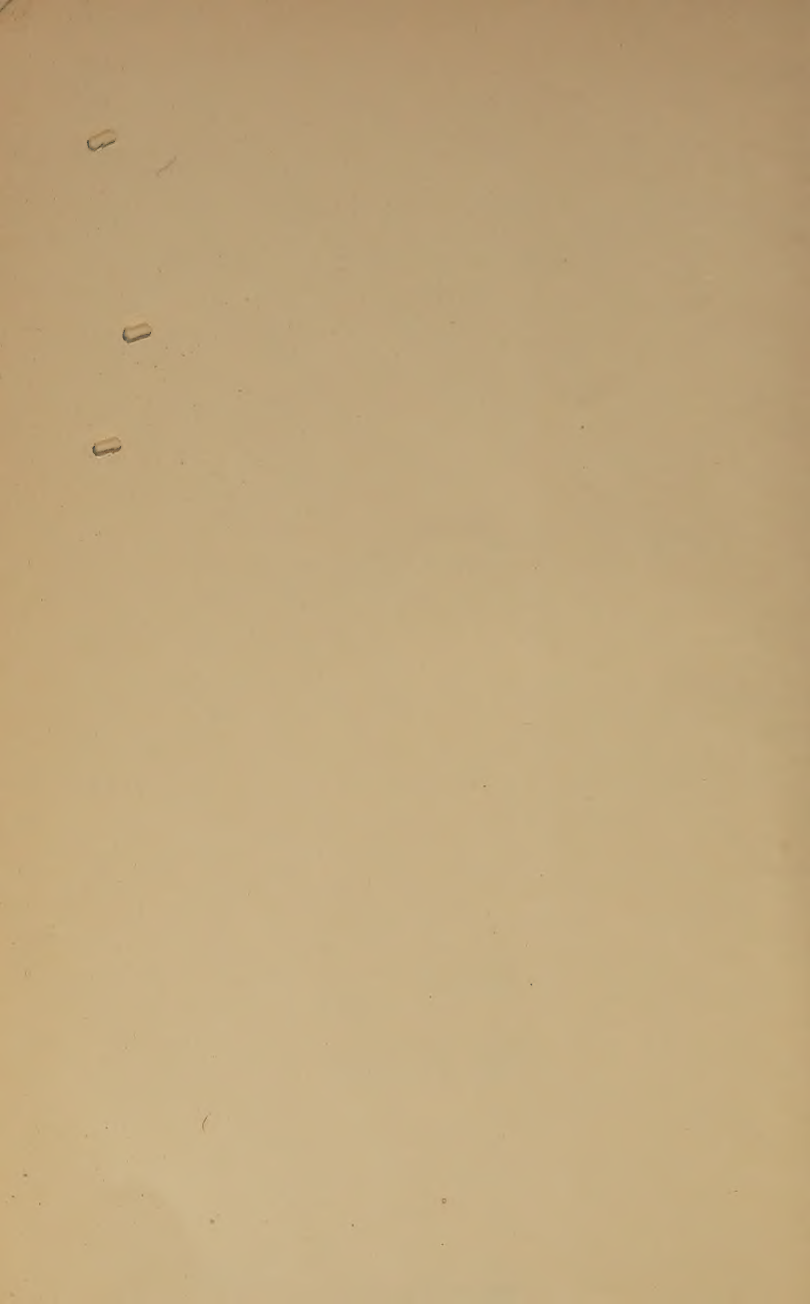
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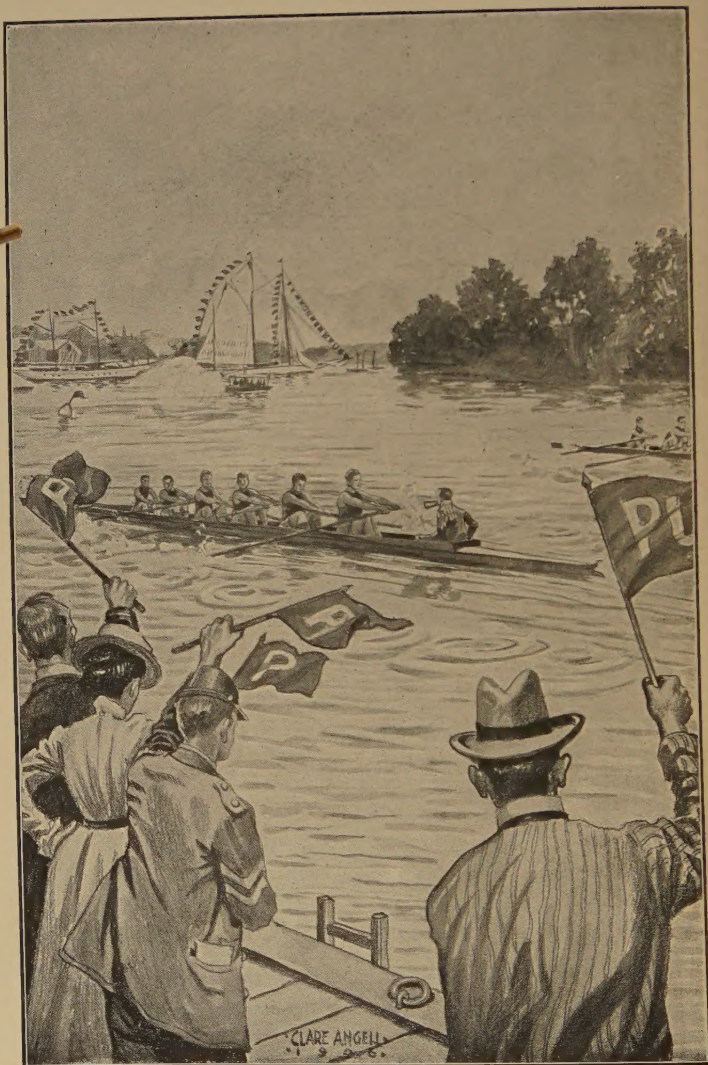
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OVER THE LINE THEY SHOT—WINNERS

Putnam Hall Rivals—Frontispiece

(Page 122)

THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS

Or, Fun and Sport Afloat and Ashore

BY

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

AUTHOR OF "THE PUTNAM HALL CADETS," "THE ROVER BOYS
SERIES," "BOB, THE PHOTOGRAPHER," ETC.



NEW YORK
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

- THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS;
Or, Fun and Sport Afloat and Ashore.
- THE PUTNAM HALL CADETS;
Or, Good Times in School and Out.
- THE ROVER BOYS ON THE PLAINS;
Or, The Mystery of Red Rock Ranch.
- THE ROVER BOYS ON THE RIVER;
Or, The Search for the Missing Houseboat.
- THE ROVER BOYS IN CAMP;
Or, The Rivals of Pine Island.
- THE ROVER BOYS ON LAND AND SEA;
Or, The Crusoes of Seven Islands.
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Or, Stirring Adventures in Africa.
- THE ROVER BOYS ON THE OCEAN;
Or, A Chase for a Fortune.
- THE ROVER BOYS AT SCHOOL;
Or, The Cadets of Putnam Hall.

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The Putnam Hall Rivals.

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INTRODUCTION

MY DEAR BOYS:

This tale of "The Putnam Hall Rivals" is a companion story to "The Putnam Hall Cadets" brought out about a year ago. It relates the further adventures of Jack Ruddy, Pepper Ditmore, and their chums, at and near Putnam Hall, an ideal boarding school for boys, located upon a beautiful lake in the upper portion of the State of New York. As at all boarding academies there are many keen rivalries,—in the classrooms, at the gymnasium, on the athletic field, and also on the lake. The majority of the boys are upright and open-hearted, but among the cadets there are to be found a few who are mean and even base, and these do a number of things which cause our heroes not a little trouble.

The "Putnam Hall Series" was started at the earnest solicitation of a number of my young friends who had read my "Rover Boys Series" and wanted to know more about what had happened at Putnam Hall previous to the coming of the three Rover brothers on the scene. When

the Rovers arrived they found at the academy a set of wide-awake lads, full of fun and "go," and it is about these that the present tale concerns itself.

Once again I thank the thousands of boys, and girls too, who have shown their appreciation of my efforts to amuse and instruct them. May you enjoy this volume from the first page to the last, is the earnest wish of the author.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD.

June 5, 1906.

THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS

CHAPTER I

OUT ON THE ICE

"LINE up, fellows, line up!"

"Wait a minute, Jack, my skate strap is loose."

"Well, don't take all the afternoon to fix it, Pep. Remember, we have only three-quarters of an hour off to-day."

"Oh, I'll remember it right enough," grumbled Pepper Ditmore, as he fixed the skate strap. "And such good skating, too! Isn't it a shame! I wish we had a whole holiday to-morrow."

"Make it a week," put in a cadet named Dale Blackmore. "I declare, I almost love skating as well as I do baseball and football."

"Are you all ready?" came from Jack Ruddy, a moment later. "I am not going to wait any longer."

"All ready!" was the answering cry, and six boys lined up on the smooth ice of the lake.

"Then go!" shouted Jack, and away went the

half-dozen, with Jack at their side, down the lake, which the keen wind of the day before had swept almost entirely clear of snow.

They were a merry, light-hearted set of boys, all bent upon having the best possible time on the present occasion. Coming out on the ice but a few minutes before, a race had been quickly arranged, the winner to be treated to some pie whenever the others should visit the town and be able to get it for him.

Of the seven boys making such rapid progress over the frozen surface of the lake, Jack Ruddy was the leader in more ways than one. He was a well-built fellow, with bright, earnest eyes, and only a few months before had been chosen major of the school battalion.

In another volume of this "Putnam Hall Series," entitled "The Putnam Hall Cadets," I related the particulars of how the military academy was organized by Captain Victor Putnam, who had received his own military training at West Point, that grand government institution of ours, and who had also seen strenuous service under Uncle Sam in the far west. A fall from a horse had put him in a sick bed, and after his recovery he had decided to retire from the army and go to teaching.

The captain had had considerable money left

to him, and with this he purchased a beautiful plot of ground on Cayuga Lake, in New York State, and there he built Putnam Hall, a handsome structure of brick and stone, shaped like the letter E, and containing many fine classrooms, dormitories, a library, messroom, office, and numerous other apartments.

The academy stood in the middle of a ten-acre plot. In front was a smooth, grassy parade ground and also a well-kept wagon road, running off in the direction of Cedarville, the nearest village on the lake. To the rear of the school the grounds ran down to the lake, and here were the barns and a storehouse on one side, and a gymnasium on the other, backed up by thick woods, and on the lake shore a boathouse and a line of bathing-houses.

The school was organized upon military lines, and each cadet was attired in military uniform and was given instruction in military matters daily. The regular studies were similar to those at any first-class preparatory school. Captain Putnam was at the head of the school, and his first assistant was Josiah Crabtree, and his second assistant George Strong. The majority of the boys liked the captain and George Strong very much, but Crabtree was a sour and morose individual they all but despised, even though they

had to admit that he was well educated and could teach when he set his mind to it.

Jack Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore were chums, hailing from the western part of New York State. Jack was a trifle older than Pepper, but both were of the same size. Jack was a whole-souled fellow and it was small wonder that, at the first election for officers, the cadets chose him as the major of the school battalion. Pepper was full of fun, and this had gained him the nickname of Imp. He was content to remain "a high private in the rear rank," as he expressed it, but nobody loved him any the less on that account.

At the academy, Jack and Pepper had speedily become acquainted with a number who had since become their warm friends. There was Dale Blackmore, just introduced, who was a great football player, and also Henry Lee, who was captain of Company A, Bart Conners, who was captain of Company B, Paul Singleton, generally called Stuffer because of his fondness for eating, Andy Snow, an acrobatic youth who was the best gymnast at the Hall, Joseph Hogan, usually spoken of as Emerald on account of his Irish brogue, and a score of others whom we shall meet as our story progresses.

These were Jack and Pepper's friends. The chums had also made some enemies, of whom the

worst was Dan Baxter, the bully of the school. The bully at this time had two cronies almost as bad as himself named Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton, and also a toady, John Fenwick, called by all the students Mumps. .

Rivalries had been keen almost from the start, and it had galled Dan Baxter exceedingly to see Jack made major of the battalion, he himself having plotted and schemed to obtain that honor, but without avail. From that hour on the bully did all he could to get Jack and his chum into trouble. This at last led to a fight between the bully and Jack, and the youthful major came out practically a victor, although the fight was broken off before it was finished. But Dan Baxter boasted that he would yet whip Jack and whip Pepper, too.

During the early part of the winter George Strong, the second assistant teacher, had mysteriously disappeared. Two strange men had been seen around the Hall several times by Jack and Pepper, and it was at last learned that the strange men had something to do with the disappearance of the assistant teacher. A hunt was instituted by Captain Putnam, in which he was joined by Jack, Pepper, Andy Snow, and Dale Blackmore. The missing instructor was found a prisoner in a cabin in the woods, his captors being the two

mysterious men, who proved to be relatives of George Strong. They had lost their fortunes and this had turned their brain, so that they were not responsible for their doings. As soon as the teacher was rescued, he sent the demented men to the west, a relative from that part of the country coming on to take them away.

George Strong had been very grateful to the boys for what they had done for him, and he did what he could to help them along in their studies. The insane relatives had imagined that the teacher had hidden away a fortune belonging to the family. The teacher told the boys that it was true that, during the Revolutionary War, his ancestors had buried a pot of gold, to keep it out of the hands of the British.

"But it was not worth anything like a million, as my unfortunate relatives believed," had been George Strong's statement to Jack and Pepper. "At the most it would be worth eight or ten thousand dollars."

"That's a tidy sum," Jack had answered.

"You are right."

"I'd like to pick up eight or ten thousand dollars," Pepper had put in. "Mr. Strong, have you any idea where this fortune you speak of is located?"

"A very faint idea."

"If you'll tell us,—and the place is close by,—we might look for it for you."

"A letter was left by my great-grandfather in which the pot of gold was mentioned as resting at the foot of the tree with the stone in its roots, twenty paces north of the old well. I have never been able to locate either the well or the tree."

"But was it around here?" Jack had questioned with interest.

"Somewhere in this vicinity, for the farm belonging to my great-grandfather was located not many miles from here."

"I thought the Indians were here at that time."

"So they were, but my great-grandfather had some Indian blood in his veins and was a frontiersman, and the red men did not molest him very much."

"Haven't you ever hunted for the pot of gold?"

"A great many times—years ago. But I at last gave it up as useless. More than likely the old well mentioned has fallen in and the tree rotted away, so the landmarks are all gone and nothing is left by which to locate the treasure."

And there the talk had come to an end, but the boys had not forgotten about the pot of gold.

CHAPTER II

A GAME OF SNAP-THE-WHIP

THE race was on in earnest and the skates flashed brightly in the rays of the declining sun.

Pepper was in advance. Dale was slowly but surely crawling up to him.

"Go it, Imp! go it!" shrieked Jack, when he saw that he could not win.

Pepper did "go it," and despite Dale's effort to get ahead kept to the front. In the meantime Andy Snow also kept coming up, until he and Dale were tied for second place.

"Whoop, Pepper has won!" cried Stuffer Singleton, who was bringing up the rear. "Where are you, Andy?"

"Here I am!" answered the acrobatic pupil, and just then struck a crack in the ice, went down, and turned a handspring, coming to his feet again like a flash.

"Would yez look at that now!" burst out Joseph Hogan, as he stopped racing to look at

Andy. "Sure an' it's in a circus you ought to be," he continued.

"Andy's doing stunts!" cried Jack.

"Say, Stuffer, why didn't you try to win?" asked Andy, as he circled up to the stout youth. "Did you eat too much for dinner?"

"Eat too much!" snorted Stuffer. "With old Crabtree watching me? Not much! When I asked for more meat he wouldn't let me have it. And I think I got the smallest dish of dessert, too!" grumbled the youth who was fond of good living.

"Pepper, you are all right," said Jack, slapping his chum on the back. "That was well won!"

"And do I get the pie?" asked Pepper, with a smile.

"Certainly you do!" came from several of the others, who all loved the Imp. "But you have got to wait till we go to Cedarville."

"Sure, an' if he'll be satisfied wid wan piece he'll not have to wait at all, at all!" came from Hogan, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Why, what have you got up your sleeve, Emerald?" asked Jack.

"Tis not up me sleeve at all, but in me pocket," answered the Irish lad, and hauled forth a piece of brown paper containing a small cut of mince pie.

"Hullo, where did you get that?" asked several of the others, in astonishment.

"Got it from the kitchen, when nobody was looking," answered Hogan. "It was on the table—set out, I think, for Snuggers' dinner. I didn't want to see him after gittin' indigestion, so I—well, I made an appropriation, as the politicians say."

"Phew! I'll wager poor Peleg was mad!" was Pepper's comment. He referred to Peleg Snuggers, the general-utility man around Putnam Hall.

"So here you are, Imp," went on Hogan, and held out the pie.

"That's the reason you proposed pie as a prize, eh?" cried Dale. "Supposing you had won?"

"Sure, I should have eaten the piece myself," answered Emerald.

"I'll accept the pie on one condition," came from Pepper. "That is that you all have a bite with me."

"We will!" was the shout, and a minute later each lad present was chewing on his mouthful of the dainty.

After that, the boys skated around for a little while longer. There were others on the lake, but they, for the most part, kept by themselves.

"I see Dan Baxter is out, with a new pair of skates," said Jack to Pepper, presently.

"Yes, and he has a new camera, too," answered Pepper. "By the way, I'd like to have a camera myself. I think I'll write home for one before long. It will be lots of sport to take some winter pictures."

Jack and Pepper, with Andy, had skated a little to one side, and now the three moved along one of the shores, where grew some evergreens, now loaded down with snow. The sun was going down and it was growing dark.

"Hi, you!" came suddenly from one side of them. "What do you mean by spoiling my picture!"

All three of the boys looked around and saw that Dan Baxter had set up his tripod on the ice. On the tripod rested his camera, the lens pointed at the evergreens on the shore. The three boys had swept along between the camera and the object Baxter wished to photograph just as the picture was being taken.

"I didn't know you were trying to get a picture, Dan," said Jack.

"Didn't know it?" roared the bully of Putnam Hall. "Are you blind?"

"Not at all."

"Then what did you rush in between for, tell

me that? I was trying to get a nice time picture, and you have spoilt the plate."

"I am very sorry. Haven't you got another plate?"

"Of course I have. Do you think I carry only one plate? But that's no reason why you and Pep Ditmore and Andy Snow should act so clownish."

"Thank you, Baxter, but I didn't act clownish," cried Pepper, circling up on his skates.

"I say you did."

"We didn't see the camera at all," put in Andy Snow. "So please don't get so hot about it."

"Oh, I know you fellows!" stormed Dan Baxter, working himself up into a rage, as was often his habit. "You think you can ride over me. But you can't do it."

"If you are going to take a picture you had better do it," said Jack, quietly. "It will be too dark in another ten minutes."

"Oh, don't give me any advice, Jack Ruddy. Just because you are the major this term you can't boss me."

"I am not trying to boss you, as you call it, Baxter. Come, why can't you drop the past and be friends?"

"I don't want to be friends with you."

"We'd rather have you for enemies any time,"

came from Gus Coulter, who had been helping his crony carry the photographing outfit.

"That's the talk," added Nick Paxton, who was likewise present. "We prefer to choose our own friends; eh, fellows?"

"And we don't choose the Ruddy crowd," said Coulter.

"Very well, have your own way," answered Jack, coldly. "But it would be nicer the other way."

"I wouldn't trust you, Ruddy, or trust your friends either," remarked Dan Baxter, bitterly. "You'd pretend to be friends and then get us into a hole the first chance you got. I know you!"

"You evidently judge us by yourself," said Pepper, hotly. "We are not so mean."

"Don't waste any words on them," said Andy. "Come on and let them take their pictures," and he skated away, and Jack and Pepper followed.

"What a fellow Dan Baxter is!" sighed the youthful major of the cadets. "No matter how nice a fellow tries to be to him he seems to resent it."

"It's because he doesn't want us for friends," answered Pepper. "He prefers fellows like Coulter and Paxton, and that sneak, Mumps."

Just then a merry crowd of skaters swept along,

playing snap-the-whip. Our friends were invited to join in, and the sport soon became so uproarious that the bully and his associates were forgotten for the time being.

"Here is where I live!" ejaculated Pepper, as he skated along. "Come on, fellows, and snap for keeps this time."

"Not too fast!" cried out Stuffer, who chanced to be on the end at the time. "I—I—can't keep up, you—know!" And then down he went on the smooth ice and rolled over and over. Several other skaters went down likewise, and a general laugh arose. Then up the cadets leaped, to form a new "whip."

"Only five minutes more!" said Dale, consulting a watch he carried. "We won't dare to be late to-day."

"Not much, with old Crabtree on guard," answered Pepper. "If we are he'll be certain to keep us in to-morrow for it."

"How I wish I had him out here on the ice," was Dale's comment.

"Sure an' we'd be after teachin' him some foin points," said Hogan. "We'd make him spread th' eagle on his head, so we would!"

"Crabtree knows enough to keep off the ice," said Jack. "Perhaps he can't skate."

"Mr. Strong is a beautiful skater," said Pep-

per. "I saw him out day before yesterday. He cut some very fancy figures."

"What a difference between those two men," said Andy. "Just as much difference as between Baxter and—and Joe Nelson," he added, naming a quiet and steady pupil, well liked by all of the cadets.

"Now, boys, for the last swing!" cried Jack. "Pepper, your turn on the end this time."

"All right, but please don't snap me into the middle of next week," answered the fun-loving youth.

"We'll snap you into the middle of next year!" cried Andy, gleefully. He wanted to square up with somebody for a tumble he had taken.

Away went the boys, in a long line, across the lake. All were shouting and cheering, the hills beyond the lake echoing with their glee. They did not attempt to make a sweep until all had gained good headway.

"Now then, all together!" came from Dale. "Let her go!"

"Whoop!" shrieked Andy. "Good-bye, Pepper!"

The long line began to sweep around. It was fairly close to the lake shore, at a spot where there was a point upon which grew a number of low bushes, all thickly covered with snow.

"Pepper is going into the snow this trip!" cried Dale, as the line broke, and Pepper was hurled forward, flat on the smooth ice. But he was mistaken. The boy turned over and over, and then disappeared around the point like a flash. The next instant there came a strange crash, an exclamation of alarm, and then a babel of voices raised in anger.

CHAPTER III

THE BULLY OF THE SCHOOL

"WHAT in the world is up now?" ejaculated Jack, as he started to skate around the point.

"Pepper is in trouble, that's sure," answered Andy.

In a moment the boys who had been playing snap-the-whip saw what had happened. Around the point of land Dan Baxter had been trying to take a time picture of the snow-laden bushes and the rocks beyond—certainly an artistic bit of landscape. Pepper, sprawling on the ice, had hit the tripod and sent the camera crashing down and the bully of Putnam Hall with it.

"Look here!" spluttered Dan Baxter, as he got on his knees. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I—er—I didn't—er—see you!" gasped Pepper. The wind had been knocked completely out of him by the unexpected contact with camera, tripod, and owner.

"It's false!" cried the bully. "You couldn't help seeing me! It's all a bluff!"

"You—er—you're mistaken," panted Pepper, and started to rise, when the bully caught him by the collar and pulled him flat again.

"Let go of me, Dan Baxter!"

"I'll not! I am going to teach you a good lesson!"

"Hi! hi! What's this?" exclaimed Jack, skating closer. "Let go of him, Baxter."

"Why should I?"

"He isn't to blame," put in Andy.

"Sure, an' that's the truth av it," broke in Emerald. "We all had a hand, so we did!"

"We were playing snap-the-whip," explained Dale. "You must have seen us."

"Thanks, but I don't watch such childish games," sneered the bully. "I was tending to my own business when he comes along, smashes the camera, and knocks me down. Do you think I am going to stand for that?"

"You can't stand if you are knocked down," said Andy, dryly.

"Humph! Don't get funny, Snow! This is no laughing matter."

"As the dentist said when he pulled the wrong tooth," came softly from Dale.

"Is the camera really broken?" asked Jack.

"Yes, it is, and it cost my dad twenty-five dollars."



SENT THE CAMERA CRASHING DOWN, AND THE BULLY

Putnam Hall Rivals

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"I can get one like it for twelve," said Stuffer.
"Same size and make."

"Humph!"

"I don't think it is broken," said Jack, looking the box over.

"I heard something crack."

"Maybe it was the glass plate. The lens and shutter are certainly O. K., and the box is tight too. One leg of the tripod is broken though."

"Pepper Ditmore has got to pay for this," came firmly from Dan Baxter.

"That's right, don't let him crawl out of it," put in Gus Coulter.

"He's too smart altogether," added Nick Paxton.

"See here, Coulter, don't you put in your oar," cried Pepper. "If you do, I'll give you what I gave you before." And then Gus Coulter slunk back, for he had not forgotten the drubbing Pepper had administered but a few weeks previous.

"Are you going to pay for the damage done or not?" demanded Dan Baxter.

"I shall certainly pay," said Pepper, promptly. "Let me have the camera and I'll get it fixed. Or you can have it fixed and have the bill sent to me."

"We'll all pay the bill," cried Jack. "I think I am as much to blame as Pep."

"So am I," added Andy, and many of the others who had been playing snap-the-whip said the same.

"I am not going to let you have my camera," said Dan Baxter, sulkily. "I'll get it mended as it should be." He paused a moment. "But I ain't going to let you knock me down for nothing."

"As I explained, it was an accident, Dan."

"Humph! You ought to be made to apologize," growled the bully. He would have attacked Pepper, only he realized that the lad had too many friends around.

A war of words followed, lasting several minutes. Then of a sudden one of the boys let out a low whistle.

"Five minutes over time, fellows. We must get back to the Hall!"

"Five minutes late!" came the cry. "This won't do at all! Come on and get back!"

And then the majority ran off, leaving Pepper and Jack with Dan Baxter and Gus Coulter.

"I've got to get back to the Hall, Baxter," said Pepper. "But I'll settle to-morrow."

"Yes—for I'll make you settle," answered the

bully, meaningly. "I've stood all I'm going to stand from you and your cronies."

So speaking the bully picked up his camera and hurried away, followed by Gus Coulter with the case containing the plates.

"I am sorry this happened," observed Jack, as he and Pepper ran for the mess-hall. "This will make Baxter more down on us than ever."

"I couldn't help it, Jack. I did what I could to steer clear of the bushes. I didn't want to scratch my face, and I didn't know he was back there out of sight."

When Jack and Pepper reached the Hall they were met by Josiah Crabtree, who viewed them sternly.

"What is the meaning of this, Major Ruddy?" demanded the first assistant teacher. "You are setting a bad example for those under you."

"We had a little trouble on the ice," answered Jack. "Pepper fell down and knocked over Dan Baxter's camera, and we had to straighten matters out."

"Humph! See that you are not late again," muttered the teacher, and passed on.

"Phew! we got off easily that time," exclaimed Pepper, in a low tone. "He must have something else to attend to," and in this surmise the youth was correct.

A drum was already rolling, and the boys were hurrying to the parade ground. Jack dashed in and got his sword, and Pepper got his gun, and both hurried to the parade ground.

"Battalion, attention!" commanded the youthful major, and soon the cadets were in line. Then came a short drill, followed by the order to march. The drums sounded out, the fifes struck up a lively air, and around the parade ground went the cadets, and at last marched into the mess-hall, where they all sat down to a plain but substantial supper.

During the meal Pepper and Jack saw Dan Baxter scowl at them, and both felt that the bully "had it in for them."

"He is bound to get square," said Jack. "Pep, we must keep our eyes peeled."

After supper the boys had an hour off. Some spent the time in the library reading, while others drifted into the gymnasium.

Jack had some studies to attend to, and went to an open classroom. Pepper walked to the gymnasium, accompanied by Andy Snow.

Both boys were soon exercising on the rings, and Andy showed what he could do on a turning bar,—doing the "giant swing" and other difficult feats.

While they were exercising, Mumps, the toady

to Dan Baxter, came in, followed by a new student named Reff Ritter.

Reff Ritter was a youth who had a very high opinion of himself. His parents were fairly well off and the boy had traveled a good deal in foreign countries. Reff had an idea that he could do almost anything, and he loved to boast of his ability and also to boast of where he had been and what he had seen. A few of the boys, including Mumps, toadied to him, but the majority voted the newcomer "a pill." He had tried to become friendly with Jack and Pepper, but both had tired of his everlasting boastings.

"Are you a gymnast?" asked Mumps, as he and Reff Ritter came to a halt close to where Andy and Pepper were practicing.

"Oh, yes, certainly!" exclaimed Ritter, in a loud voice. "I took some lessons in New York and I finished up while I was in London and Berlin. A German instructor—one of the *Turn-verein* men—taught me a lot of tricks."

"What do you think of that?" went on Mumps, as Andy made a swing on the rings.

"Fair, only fair," drawled Reff Ritter. "Not at all graceful. Now when I was stopping at Madrid, there was a Spaniard there who showed me how to do a turn like that, and it was perfection, I can assure you."

Andy heard the remark, and it made his ears tingle. He gave a swing and landed on the floor in front of Ritter and Mumps.

"I'd like to see that Spanish swing you just mentioned," he said, coldly.

"Humph! I didn't—er—calculate to do anything in the way of gymnastics this evening," stammered Reff Ritter.

"Maybe you are afraid to try," went on Andy, pointedly.

"Not at all! not at all!" exclaimed the new student. "I'll show you how to do it if you want me to."

He took off his coat and vest and also his collar and tie. Then he leaped up on the rings and began to swing.

"Here goes!" he called out, and made the turn, while a small crowd began to gather.

"Good! That's fine!" called out Mumps. "Now, Andy Snow, how do you like it?"

The turn had been a fairly good one. Andy smiled quietly.

"Can you make the double turn?" he called up to Reff Ritter.

"Certainly—I learned that in Berlin also," was the answer, and the turn was made, after a good deal of an effort. Then, warming up, Reff Ritter began to show off, doing about everything he had

ever learned. He did not stop until he was practically out of breath.

Taken as a whole, it was a fair exhibition of gymnastic work, and some of the boys standing around applauded.

"Have you finished?" asked Pepper.

"I have," answered Reff Ritter. He caught his breath. "There's a pattern for your friend to go by."

"Thank you, but I don't need any pattern," answered Andy. "Here goes for another try at it!"

He went up lightly and began to perform. First he did several things which were comparatively easy. But each turn was clean-cut in itself and decidedly graceful.

"Andy certainly knows how to go at it," remarked Joe Nelson, who was present.

"Huh! He hasn't done anything as difficult as I did," put in Reff Ritter.

Then Andy began to do other things, making swings and leaps that were really wonderful in one who was only an amateur. The boys applauded more and more. Then he made a leap and a twist seldom seen outside of a regular circus performance.

"Look at that!" cried Pepper, enthusiastically. "Nobody can do better!"

"Sure, an' Andy's the bist acrobat in the school, so he is," said Emerald.

And the majority of those standing around agreed with the Irish cadet.

CHAPTER IV

A DOSE OF SNOW AND ICICLES

As soon as it became apparent that Andy was doing much better than he had been able to do, Reff Ritter lost interest in the exhibition going on.

"I reckon I've seen enough," he drawled. "It's cold in here anyway. I'm going back to the school," and he shuffled off, followed by Mumps.

"Andy, you are ten times better than he is on the bar and rings," cried Pepper.

"Sure, an' that Ritter is a big blow, so he is!" was Hogan's comment. "I am glad that Andy took him down."

"I don't think he'll like it much," observed Andy.

The acrobatic youth was right. Reff Ritter was very bitter at heart.

"Where are Baxter and Coulter?" he asked of Mumps, as they hurried outside.

"Went down to the old boathouse," and Mumps winked.

"For a smoke?"

"Yes," was the whispered answer. For, as my readers may imagine, smoking among the cadets was strictly prohibited.

"Think I'll have a cigarette myself," said Ritter. "Will you come along?"

Now, Mumps did not like to smoke, as it made him sick. But he did not wish to offend his new friend, and so he agreed to go along. They soon made their way to where Baxter and Coulter had taken themselves, and the toady gave a peculiar whistle.

It was answered a moment later, and Coulter appeared.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "All right, come in."

They entered a section of the old boathouse that was but little used. It would have been cold, only the cadets had found a charcoal stove, and this was burning. Around it were Dan Baxter, Paxton, and Coulter, all smoking cigarettes.

"Hullo, glad to see you," said Dan Baxter to Reff Ritter. "Sit down with us and enjoy yourself."

Ritter sat down and drew from his pocket a package of imported cigarettes. He offered one to Mumps, and the toady lit it. Then Ritter lit one himself, inhaling the smoke and blowing it forth through his nose

"Say, this is something like," he observed.
"Quite a cozy bunk you have."

"It's good enough for a smoking place in the winter time," answered the bully of Putnam Hall.
"In the summer time we can go anywhere."

"Captain Putnam must be down on smoking."
"He is."

"I don't see why," said Paxton. "I've smoked ever since I was eight years old." And his pinched face showed it.

"I love these imported Egyptian cigarettes," went on Reff Ritter. "I get the genuine, you know."

"I've got a treat for all hands," said Dan Baxter, after a pause. He brought forth a big bottle from his overcoat.

"What is that?" asked Mumps.

"Wine—I bought it down at Cedarville."

"Just the stuff!" exclaimed Ritter. "I'm with you on wine. I got used to drinking it when I was over in Europe. You know they serve it regularly for dinner at all the hotels."

The bottle of wine was passed around, and all of the boys assembled drank a portion. Mumps wanted to decline, but did not dare.

"Don't be afraid of it, Mumpsy, old boy," said Baxter to his toady. "Drink it, it will make a man of you."

The boys continued to smoke and drink for the best part of half an hour. Then they heard a peculiar noise outside.

"Hi, somebody is coming!" cried Paxton, in alarm. "Put out the light!"

The lantern that hung on a nail was extinguished and the boys listened. They heard somebody moving around in the dark. Then all became silent.

"I—I don't like this," said Mumps, in a trembling voice. "I think somebody was spying on us!"

"We had better get back to the school," said Baxter, and this advice was followed without delay. They saw somebody running across the campus, but could not make out who the person was.

During the time the Baxter crowd had been smoking and drinking they had talked over many matters, and particularly their troubles with Pepper, Jack, and Andy Snow. The bully of the Hall wanted to get even with Pepper for the trouble on the ice, and Reff Ritter was willing to do almost anything to "put a spoke in Andy Snow's wheel," as he expressed it.

The upshot of the talk was that the crowd determined to play some tricks on our friends, and do it that very night.

"I know something brand-new," said Coulter, and told his cronies of it.

"That's the talk—if we can work it," said Baxter. "And we'll do something else, too," he added.

Gus Coulter's idea was to get some snow and stuff it into the pillows of the other boys. The heat of the boys' heads would gradually melt the snow and leave the lads in beds that were soaking wet.

As luck would have it, Dan Baxter and his party found the dormitory occupied by Jack and the others empty when they went upstairs. They quickly got out the bed pillows, and from the roof of an addition to the academy procured the necessary snow, which they stuffed into the pillow-cases, next to the feathers. Then they got a number of icicles and put several at the foot of each bed, under the blankets, and in such manner that the boys' feet would come up against them.

"And now for a finishing touch," said Ritter, and placed a big chunk of snow on the upper edge of the dormitory door, leaving the door slightly open. Then the boys hid away to watch proceedings.

It was not long after this that Jack and his friends came upstairs to go to bed. They did not, however, go straight to their dormitory, but

stopped to talk to some other cadets at the end of the hall.

"I wish they would go in their room," whispered Paxton, from a corner. "I am getting tired of waiting."

"Say, here comes old Crabtree," put in Mumps.

"Yes, and he's going toward their room!" cried Gus Coulter, in surprise.

He spoke the truth, and an instant later Josiah Crabtree pushed upon the dormitory door. Down came the big chunk of snow on the teacher, sending him flat to the floor.

"Hi! hi! What's this?" spluttered Josiah Crabtree. "Who is—er—who covered me with snow?"

He turned over and got to his feet. His shoulders were full of snow and some snow had gone down inside his collar, causing him to shiver with cold.

The noise attracted the attention of all the cadets in the vicinity, and soon they gathered around the teacher.

"What's the matter?"

"Old Crabtree is taking a snow bath for his health."

"Where did all that snow come from?"

"Major Ruddy, can you explain this?" de-

manded the assistant teacher, turning angrily to Jack.

"No, sir, I cannot," was the answer.

"I was going to enter this dormitory when down came this snow, almost burying me alive!"

"I am sorry, Mr. Crabtree."

"It is outrageous—villainous! Somebody is responsible!"

"I am not. I know nothing about the snow."

"I guess it was put there for our benefit," put in Pepper. "We were about to enter the room when you came along."

"Humph! A silly trick."

"How did you happen to catch it, Mr. Crabtree?" asked Andy, curiously.

"I was going into the room to see if the windows were closed. There is a great draught through this hallway, as you can feel. Then you do not know who did this?" went on the instructor, gazing sharply at the assembled pupils.

All looked blankly at each other. Dan Baxter and his cronies took good care to keep in the background.

"Gather up the snow and throw it out of a window," ordered Josiah Crabtree, and this was done, but not before several snowballs had been thrown, one catching Mumps in the neck and another landing on Reff Ritter's left ear. Then the

throwing was stopped, order was restored, and all of the cadets were told to retire.

"Somebody put up a job on us right enough," observed Pepper, when he and his chums were in the dormitory and the door had been closed. "If old Crabtree hadn't come along one of us would have gotten that dose."

"I'll wager that I know who is guilty," came from Dale.

"Dan Baxter and his crowd?"

"Exactly. Didn't you see how they hung back and how they grinned at us?"

"I saw it," came from Andy. "That's why I soaked Mumps with a snowball."

"And I let Ritter have it in the ear," said Pepper. "But I say, fellows, we want to be on our guard."

"Do you think they played more jokes on us?" questioned Hogan. "Sure an' it would be just like 'em to do it, so it would!" he added.

"It certainly won't do any harm to look around," suggested Jack. "It won't take but a few minutes to do it."

Pepper held up his hand.

"Wait!" he whispered, and sliding to the door, threw it open suddenly. Outside he found Ritter, Baxter, and Coulter. The trio were amazed at being thus suddenly confronted.

"I thought so!" cried Pepper, triumphantly.

"Oh, go to grass!" muttered the bully of the school, and walked away.

"We'll fix you another time," muttered Ritter.

"And do it well too," added Coulter.

Pepper waited until he had seen the others enter their dormitory and then closed his own door again.

"I've found something!" cried Andy, and dove into his pillow-case. "Filled with snow!"

"Snow for Snow!" said Jack.

"That's a cold pun," observed Dale. "Just the same, here is snow in my pillow too. Say, we just got this in time. It would have melted before long and then our pillows would have been wringing wet."

"Don't say a word about snow," said Emerald. "Just be after lookin' at this now!" And he held up three icicles he had dislodged from his bed. "Ain't they iligant foot-warmers though!"

Without delay the other boys looked into their beds, and soon all the icicles were disposed of, and the snow was likewise cleaned away. They then made another hunt around the dormitory, to make certain that nothing else was wrong.

"I guess we are safe now," said Jack, at last. "But what a mess this would have made if we had not found it out in time!"

"I know what I am going to do," said Pepper, decidedly.

"What, Imp?" came from several of the others.

"I'm going to pay the Baxter crowd back, and with interest."

And the others instantly agreed to help him.

CHAPTER V

THE DOCTORED CAKE

Two days later Pepper and Andy were out on the lake skating, when Andy broke his skate and pitched flat on the ice.

"Hullo, what are you doing?" cried Pepper.

"Looking to see how thick the ice is," was the merry retort.

"I thought you were looking for stars," went on the Imp.

"No, thanks, I didn't go down on the back of my head. Just the same, my left skate is broken."

"That's too bad."

Both of the boys looked the broken skate over, and then retired to the old boathouse to see if they could not fix it. By chance they entered the place which Dan Baxter's crowd had been using from time to time as a rendezvous.

"Hullo, look here!" cried Pepper, gazing around. "I didn't know that anybody came here."

"Neither did I."

"Here are lots of cigarette butts."

"Yes, Pep, and—look in the corner."

Pepper looked in the direction pointed out. From under a pile of old leaves, which the wind had blown into the boathouse when the door was open, shone the neck of a bottle.

"A wine bottle, I declare, Andy. Can it be that some of the fellows have been drinking down here?"

"I don't know. It looks a little like it."

"But that is against the rules."

"So is smoking, and those butts look to be pretty fresh."

The boys were mystified, but could not answer the question which arose in their minds. They looked around for what they were after, but could not mend the broken skate.

"I'll have to take it down to Cedarville and have it mended," said the acrobatic youth. "Maybe I can get off to-morrow."

"If you can't, I'll lend you a pair, Andy. I have two."

"Thank you, Pep. But I like this pair. They just fit my feet."

It was not until the following Tuesday that Pepper, Andy, and Jack got permission to visit Cedarville, the nearest steamboat town on the lake to Putnam Hall. In the meantime, on Monday,

Dale and Hogan came to them in some little excitement.

"We have got news," said Dale.

"Dan Baxter is going to celebrate," added the Irish cadet. "Sure an' he's going to have an elegant spread, so he is!"

"What is he going to celebrate?" asked Pepper, with interest.

"He got a big allowance from home—smuggled it past Captain Putnam, too," explained Dale. "As a consequence, he is going to give the fellows of his dormitory a feast, or something like that."

"How did you learn all this?" asked Jack.

"By accident. Baxter passed a note to Paxton, who dropped it. I thought it was some plot against us, and read the note. Then I heard Paxton telling Billy Sabine. Baxter is going to make it the biggest spread ever given in this school."

"That is our chance to get even with him!" cried Pepper, his eyes dancing. "We ought to doctor up that feast for them."

"How can we do it?" asked Jack.

"Oh, I'll think up something before the time comes," answered the Imp. "When does it come off?"

"Wednesday night."

This was all Dale and Emerald could tell, and

a minute later Jack, Pepper, and Andy entered the classroom for the afternoon session.

It was not until after school on Tuesday that the three boys started for Cedarville. It was rather a long distance, but they did not mind it. They skated part of the way on the lake and then took to the wagon-road.

Cedarville was not a large place, but it boasted of some rather good stores, and also a blacksmith shop and several churches. The cadets went to the churches from time to time and were fairly well known to all of the storekeepers.

Having left the broken skate where it could be mended, Andy and his chums walked around the town and made several small purchases. Coming out of one of the stores they met a farmer whom they knew, he having delivered potatoes and other vegetables at the Hall.

"How are you, Mr. Shepard?" said Jack.

"How do you do, boys?" answered the farmer. "Visitin' town, eh?"

"No, we're out hunting elephants," answered Pepper, with a grin.

At this the farmer, who was a good-natured man, laughed.

"Got to have your joke, I see," he observed. "How be you gettin' on at school?"

"Bang-up," answered Andy.

"Captain Putnam is a powerful good man."

"Yes, we all like the captain," answered Jack.

"How are matters at your farm this winter?"

"Kind o' slow. Had some of the boys over yesterday."

"Who?"

"A feller named Baxter and two friends. They come fer some apples an' cider an' some other things. Got my wife to cook a turkey fer 'em too."

"Oh, yes, we know something about that spread," said Jack, carelessly. "He is going to give some of the boys something great."

"Have you delivered the stuff yet?" asked Pepper.

"Goin' to at supper time to-morrow night."

"Not at the academy?" said Andy.

"No, he said it was to be a surprise on everybody."

"On some of the fellows," corrected Pepper.

"You are going to leave the stuff somewhere for him, I suppose," said Andy.

"Yes—outside the grounds—at seven sharp," answered Amos Shepard, and then as a farmhand came along, he walked away with the man.

"This is certainly news," was Pepper's comment. "Boys, we must get hold of that stuff if we can do it."

"Right you are," answered Jack. "But how is it to be done? We don't know where Mr. Shepard will leave it, and it won't do to ask him."

"No, that would make him suspicious," said Andy. "But I know what we can do."

"What?"

"Sneak out on the road that runs from his farm over to the Hall. When he comes along we can watch and see where he goes."

"Good for you!" cried Pepper. "Just the very thing!"

The walking had made the boys hungry, and before starting on the return to the Hall they entered the main bakery of Cedarville, to get some cakes and a small pie.

"Hullo, there's a big cake for you!" cried Pepper, pointing to one that had just been placed on a back shelf. "I shouldn't mind a slice of that!"

"Maybe you'll get a slice of it," said the baker, rubbing his hands together and smiling in a meaning manner.

"How so?" asked Andy, quickly.

"Oh, you wait and see," said the baker.

"Can that be a cake Dan Baxter ordered?" whispered Jack to his chums.

"Maybe," said Pepper. He followed the baker to the back of the shop. "I guess that's Baxter's cake, eh?" he whispered into the man's ear.

The baker winked suggestively.

"Is he coming for it, or are you going to send it to him?"

"He told me not to say anything about it to anybody," replied the baker.

"Oh! Well, I won't ask questions then. Don't say anything about our being here," went on Pepper. "It might hurt his feelings, if he knew we had seen the cake before he showed it."

"I shan't say a word," answered the baker.

The boys paid for their purchases and quitted the bakery, and looking through the window they saw the baker leave the shop to go to work at his oven, which was in the cellar.

"Oh, if only we could doctor that cake!" murmured Pepper. "I'd give a dollar to be able to do it!"

"The icing on the top was soft," said Andy.

"It's a raisin cake," said Jack. "A few stones in place of some raisins wouldn't go bad."

"And a little pepper would give it an extra flavor," said Pepper, with a wink. "Come on!"

He ran to the nearest grocery store and there procured some strong red pepper. In the meantime Andy found a cleared spot in a sunny corner of the village and got a handful of sand.

The three boys walked back to the vicinity of

the bakery. The baker was not in sight. But there was a bell on his door, which rang out sharply every time the door was opened.

"We can't go in by the door," said Jack. "He will come at once, as soon as the bell rings."

"There is a side window—let us try that," said Pepper.

"Supposing he comes?" asked Andy.

"We can buy some more cakes."

The window opened out on a lane and was located close to the shelf upon which rested the cake. They found the lower sash unfastened and raised it cautiously. Then all three hopped into the bakery and stepped over to where the cake rested.

It took but a few minutes to fill the cake with pepper and fine sand. This done, they smoothed down the half-soft icing with the blade of a pocketknife. Just as they were finishing the work they heard footsteps on the stairs in the rear.

"Quick—out you go!" cried Pepper, and cleared the window, followed by his chums. Then they put down the sash and ran off, without the baker catching sight of them or having any idea of what had been done.

"That cake will taste fine," said Andy, with a laugh, when they were on their way back to the

Hall. "Won't Dan Baxter and his crowd enjoy it!"

"They'll want to hang us if they find us out," said Jack.

"We must take good care that they don't find us out," came from Pepper.

"Now, if we can only locate the things Mr. Shepard is going to bring over," went on Jack.

"I'd like to lay hold of the turkey," said Andy.

"Yum! yum! I wouldn't do a thing to that bird!"

"Ditto here!" cried Pepper. "Oh, we must locate the turkey by all means—and some bread and butter. Think of nice turkey sandwiches!"

"And a few apples!"

And thus talking of what more they intended to do, the three cadets hurried back to Putnam Hall with all possible speed.

CHAPTER VI

THE BASKET IN THE TREE

SUPPER was served at Putnam Hall in the winter time at six o'clock, and as a general thing the meal was over inside of half an hour, when the cadets had an hour or more to themselves.

On the following day, after supper, Jack and the others watched Dan Baxter and his cronies closely.

"Emerald, you and Dale stop them about seven o'clock," said Pepper, and to this the two cadets agreed.

The Irish lad and Dale kept a close eye on Dan Baxter, who was with Coulter and Reff Ritter. At a few minutes to seven the bully and his cronies started away from the Hall in the direction of a side road—that leading past the Shepard farm.

"Here is where we hold 'em up a bit," said Dale, and ran forward calling loudly.

"What do you want?" asked the bully, stopping short, with a scowl.

"Wait a minute," said Dale, and walked up slowly, while Hogan did the same.

"Don't be all night about it," put in Reff Ritter.

"What's this report I heard to-day?" said Dale, facing the bully.

"What report?" asked Baxter, suspiciously.

"You know, Baxter."

"I must say I do not."

"About that race on the ice, and all that," said Hogan. "It's a queer tale, so it is! Didn't yez hear all about it at Cedarville?"

"I haven't heard anything."

"Neither have I," put in Ritter.

"I guess Coulter knows about it," went on Dale. "He usually knows everything. Did you see the horse?" he demanded.

"The horse?" asked Gus Coulter, puzzled. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"That horse they brought into the school."

"I didn't see any horse."

"Certainly he was a beauty," said Hogan, with a broad laugh. "All painted with that red paint, too. Where did that paint come from, answer me that now?" he demanded, in a whisper.

"I don't know anything about a horse or any red paint either," growled Dan Baxter. "Is this a joke?"

"Listen to that!" cried Dale. "Say, you can put on a good front, can't you?"

"It's true."

"Maybe you don't know about that ghost business either," came from Hogan. "Very innocent, so ye are, I must say!" And he winked with his left eye in a most mysterious manner.

"See here, you are talking Greek to me!" roared Baxter. He was anxious to get away. "If you can't explain I don't want to talk to you."

"Emerald, perhaps they don't know after all," whispered Dale, but in such a manner that the bully and his friends could hear.

"Be gorry, I hope we haven't put our foot into it thin!" muttered the Irish cadet. He walked up to Reff Ritter. "Say, forget it!"

"Forget what?" demanded Ritter.

"All I was after telling you."

"You've told me nothing yet."

"Is that so now? Then so much the better."

"Oh, you're trying to fool us!" burst out Dan Baxter. "I don't want to listen to another word," and he turned away, and his friends followed him. Dale and Hogan waited a minute and then went back to the Hall, so that the bully and his cronies might not get too suspicious.

"We held 'em up ten minutes," said Dale. "I hope that helped Pepper and the others out."

In the meantime Pepper, Andy, and Jack left the Hall by a roundabout way and hurried along the road leading to the Shepard farm. It was quite dark and rather cold, although there was but little wind.

"I see a carriage coming!" exclaimed Jack, presently. "Step back of the bushes and see who is driving it."

The others complied, and soon the carriage came up. On the seat driving was Amos Shepard, and at his feet rested a big square basket.

"There he goes," exclaimed Pepper, when the farmer had passed. "Let us follow him."

It was an easy matter to follow the carriage, for the road was rocky and the farmer had to drive slowly. Coming to a turn, the man in the carriage dismounted and placed the big basket in a crotch of a tree. Then he went on his way to Cedarville.

"Quick—there is no time to lose!" exclaimed Pepper. "Dan Baxter may come for this basket at any minute."

They soon had the basket out of the crotch of the tree and examined the contents. There were the stuffed turkey, nicely cooked, some fresh biscuit, two pies, some apples, a jug of cider, and some other things.

"We'll appropriate a pie and some biscuits and

apples, and likewise a bit of the turkey," said Andy.

"Be careful," warned Jack. "If you muss the turkey up Baxter will suspect something."

"I'll fix that easily enough," came from the resourceful Pepper.

Having taken what they wanted, the boys proceeded to "season" what remained with the pepper and with some lard and vinegar Andy had procured on the sly from the academy kitchen. They had brought some napkins with them, and in these placed what they had appropriated. Then Pepper calmly proceeded to break down one of the tree limbs.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Jack.

"I'll show you," said Pepper, calmly, and under the broken-down limb he placed the basket, resting on its side. "How is that?"

"First-rate!" laughed Jack.

"Looks exactly as if the basket had been on the limb and it had broken and spilt the stuff," said Andy.

"Now we'll get out of sight and watch," went on the Imp.

They ran out of sight and waited. Not five minutes later Dan Baxter, Coulter, and Ritter hove into sight.

"Here is the spot, fellows," they heard the bully of the Hall exclaim. "Anybody around?"

"I don't see anybody," answered Ritter.

"Where's the basket?" asked Coulter, gazing up into the tree.

"Here it is, on the ground," said Baxter. "Too bad, it's tumbled over."

"The limb broke down with it, it was so heavy," said Reff Ritter.

Baxter got down and struck a match.

"The stuff is pretty well tumbled around," said he. "And, say—some of the turkey is gone!" he added.

"Maybe some animal came up and took it," suggested Coulter. "I thought I saw a dog on the road."

"I am not going to eat after a dog," said Ritter.

"Oh, I reckon it's all right," said Baxter, hastily. He did not want anything to occur to spoil the grandness of his proposed spread. To his cronies he had boasted that this was to be the finest spread ever given on the sly at Putnam Hall.

Taking up the basket, the bully rearranged the things. He noticed that there was not as much as he had ordered, and made up his mind to "pitch into" Amos Shepard when next they should meet. He and Coulter carried the basket and

Ritter the jug of cider, and off they went to the Hall, entering unobserved by a back way, and sneaking to their dormitory, where the goodies were hidden in a clothes closet.

"Oh, wait till to-night!" said Pepper, as he and his chums also returned.

The evening seemed to drag after that, so many were waiting for bedtime to come. Baxter tried to learn from Dale what the talk earlier in the evening had meant, but got no satisfaction.

All of the boys of the bully's dormitory had been invited to the feast and also some other cadets, making a total of sixteen lads who were to participate. They were all followers of Dan Baxter, and but few of them were liked by the other cadets.

At last it was time to go to bed, and one after another the boys went off. Our friends undressed and then slipped on some warm coats over their night garments. Soon the monitors came around to see that everything was as it should be for the night.

"Now is our time," whispered Pepper. "Baxter's crowd will be stirring soon."

With caution they left their dormitory and stole along the hallway. As luck would have it, there was a room next to the Baxter dormitory that was vacant, the plaster having fallen and

being not yet repaired. The door was unlocked and our friends entered.

"Listen," said Pepper, as they all came close to a door which communicated with the next dormitory.

"Now, fellows, we'll have the finest feast you ever saw at any school," they heard Dan Baxter say. "I'll carve the turkey and you, Coulter, can cut the cake, and Mumps can pour out the cider. After the cider we'll have something a little stronger."

"I don't think they have anything hotter than that cider," murmured Pepper.

Those outside of the room heard the bully and his cronies make numerous preparations for the feast. Then the stuff was passed around and all prepared to do full justice to what was handed to them.

"That is all right," exclaimed Reff Ritter, as he bit into a turkey sandwich. "Say, wouldn't it make Jack Ruddy and his crowd feel sore to know about these good things we are having!"

"Say, this sandwich is pretty warm," came from Paxton. "Phew! but it's hot!"

"Why, it's cold, Nick," answered the bully of the Hall.

"Is it? Not much! It's full of pepper."

"Ouch!" came from Mumps. "Oh, my tooth!"

"What's the matter with it?" asked Coulter.

"I've bitten on something hard. Guess it was a stone."

"Creation, what's this?" came from Ritter.
"Say, Dan, this smells like vinegar."

Another boy was drinking some cider. He made a wry face and ejected the liquid from his mouth.

"That's the worst cider I ever tasted!"

"Let me see!" cried Dan Baxter, and caught up a glassful. He took one swallow and began to breathe heavily.

"It's—it's—pep—peppery!" he gasped. "Oh, my insides are burning up! Somebody give me some water."

"Whow! The cake is peppery, too!" came from another.

"And full of sand!"

"This piece of celery has got lard all over it!"

"This is the worst sandwich I ever tried to eat!"

"This apple is full of vinegar!"

"So is this currant jelly!"

"Say, fellows, somebody has played a trick on us!"

"Don't eat any more of the stuff. It may be poisoned!"

"Oh, don't say that!" groaned Mumps, turning pale. "I—I don't want to be poisoned!"

"Who—who touched this stuff?" gasped Dan Baxter. He was so angry he could hardly speak.

No one could answer the question.

"If I ever find out who did it, I'll—I'll skin 'em alive, that's what I'll do!"

"One thing is certain," said Reff Ritter, in deep disgust. "All of the stuff was fixed up, and there will be no feast to-night, that is sure. I wouldn't touch another mouthful for a thousand dollars."

"I am going to find out who did this," said Baxter, starting up. "And I am going to find out to-night!"

CHAPTER VII

IN THE CLASSROOM

"It's time for us to get out!" whispered Jack to his chums. "Baxter is going on a rampage!"

"To our dormitory!" whispered Andy, and led the way on tiptoes. The others followed, and in less than a minute they were safe in their room with the door tightly closed.

"Perhaps we had better get into bed for the present," suggested Stuffer Singleton. "Baxter may come this way."

This was considered good advice, and it did not take them long to put out the light that had been lit and get into bed. With ears on the alert they awaited developments.

They were not long in coming. Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and then they heard some whispered conversation in front of their door. Pepper wanted to laugh outright and had all he could do to hold in.

"I don't hear them," came softly in Dan Baxter's voice.

"They are foxy," answered Ritter.

The door was tried and Dan Baxter looked into the room. He could see next to nothing in the almost total darkness.

"Who—who's there?" asked Andy, sleepily.
"Is it time to—to get up?"

A grunt from Dan Baxter was the only response, and then the door was closed again, and they heard Baxter and some others moving away.

"Say, Andy, that was rich!" whispered Pepper, and gave a low laugh.

"Don't stir too much yet," cautioned Jack.
"They may come back."

"I am going to the door to watch," answered Pepper. "If they come this way again I can crawl back to bed in a jiffy."

Standing at the door, which he held on a crack, the Imp saw Baxter and several others move from one dormitory to another, listening and spying at every door.

"Cheese it, here comes Mr. Strong!" he heard Coulter say, a short while later, and off the bully's crowd scampered to their rooms. Then the second assistant teacher came up the stairs and Pepper hurried back to his bed. George Strong looked around the hallway and walked to several dormitories, and then passed on to the third floor of the building.

"Will they come back again?" asked Andy, after a long spell of silence.

"Better wait a while longer and see," said Hogan.

"I'm itching to get at that stuff," came, with a sigh, from Stuffer.

"Did you ever know a time that you wasn't hungry, Stuffer?" asked Andy.

"Humph! I guess you'll get away with your full share, Andy," was the retort.

At last the boys considered themselves safe and crawled from their beds once more. A dim light was made, and sitting in a circle, they divided the good things on hand and devoured them with a keen relish. The turkey proved to be of the best, and the pie was "prime," as Andy expressed it.

"Oh, if Baxter could only see us now," whispered Pepper, with a mouth half full of turkey.

"It would make him dance with joy, I don't think," answered Jack.

The little feast kept up the best part of half an hour.

"Here goes the last of the pie!" cried Stuffer.

"Baxter, we thank thee for this feast!" added Pepper.

"Come again," put in Jack.

"Just you fellows wait, that's all!" came an

unexpected voice from the doorway, and turning swiftly, they saw Dan Baxter standing there. He was shaking his fist at the crowd.

"Hullo!" gasped Pepper. For the instant he could say no more.

"I suspected it from the start," fairly hissed the bully of Putnam Hall. "Just wait, that's all! If I don't square up you can shoot me!" And away he went, giving the door the hardest kind of a bang after him.

"Now our cake is dough," came from Stuffer.

"Sure an' I'd like to know what he'll be after doin'," came curiously from Emerald.

"I wonder if he'll have the nerve to call Captain Putnam?" mused Andy.

"No," answered Jack, promptly. "He won't report this, for if he did he knows we would tell on him too. He'll try to get square some other way."

"To bed, all of you!" cried Pepper. "Don't forget how he slammed that door. Some of the teachers may be along before we know it."

The remains of the feast were cleared away and the room put in order. Then the cadets went to sleep, and slumbered soundly until the bell awoke them in the morning.

It was not until the boys entered the mess-hall that they saw Dan Baxter again. The bully of

the school looked like a thundercloud, and so did Reff Ritter, Coulter, and Paxton.

"They have it in for us, that is dead certain," whispered Andy to Pepper.

"Yes, we'll have to keep our eyes peeled for them," was the reply.

"Ditmore, stop your talking!" came sternly from Josiah Crabtree.

"Yes, sir," answered the Imp, meekly.

"You talk altogether too much at meals," went on the sour-looking teacher.

"Yes, sir."

"Silence!"

"Yes, sir."

"If you say another word I'll send you from the table," stormed Josiah Crabtree, and after that Pepper said no more.

That morning everything seemed to go wrong in the classroom. Many lessons were missed and several teachers were out of humor. Josiah Crabtree stormed around, and finally told both Pepper and Jack that they would have to stay in after school in the afternoon.

"Mr. Crabtree, I do not think I am to blame in this," said Jack. "I understood you to say we were to take up pages 180 and 181 in the history only."

"I said 180 to 184," snapped the teacher.

"He did not," murmured Pepper under his breath.

"You are growing very negligent in your studies," went on the teacher, tartly. "I shall not stand for it."

"Then sit down," grumbled Andy.

"Snow, did you speak?" thundered Crabtree. Andy was silent.

"Snow, answer me."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you may remain in after school also."

"Thank you for nothing," growled Andy, but this time under his breath.

"I am going to fix old Crabby," said Pepper, during recess. "I think it is a shame to keep us in—with the last of the skating at hand."

Pepper's opportunity to torment the teacher came sooner than expected. That afternoon Josiah Crabtree had to leave the classroom for several minutes. At noon the Imp had secured some flour in a paper bag. He passed up to the platform, and on the sly placed the bag of flour in the teacher's desk, turning it upside down, with the bottom fastened by a slit in the paper to the lock part of the desk lid.

"We will now take up our next study," said Josiah Crabtree, a little later. He looked around for a lead pencil, but could find none. Then he

walked to his desk, sat down, and started to raise the lid.

The lid did not work very easily, and he gave it a nervous jerk. Up it came, and as it did so, the flour shot down out of the bag, into the desk and over the teacher's lap. Some arose in a cloud, covering Crabtree's face and neck.

"Wooh!" spluttered the teacher, leaping back. "Wh—what is this? Who—er—who—wooh!—played this trick on me!"

He was covered from head to foot with the flour, which got into his eyes and nose and caused him to sneeze loudly. His appearance was so comical all of the students set up a very loud roar.

"Silence! silence! I will have silence!" roared the teacher, wrathfully. Then he had to sneeze some more, and the classroom burst into another roar.

"Crabtree has turned miller!" whispered Stuffer.

"Doesn't he make a fine-looking statue?" came from Dale.

"Boys! boys! be quiet!" stormed Josiah Crabtree. "This is—ker-chew! outrageous! I demand to know who—ker-chew—ker-chew!"

"Anybody ker-chew around here?" asked Pepper, calmly.

"Who did this?" fairly yelled the teacher.
"Who did it, I say?"

"The flour," whispered Jack, and this made some of the boys snicker.

"Ruddy, what did you say?" demanded Josiah Crabtree.

"I said the flour did it," answered Jack.

"Really! you are a monument of wisdom," said the teacher, sarcastically. "You may remain after school."

The teacher shut up the flour-covered desk and brushed himself off with a whisk-broom.

"The whole class may stay in after school," he thundered, a moment later.

"I didn't do that, Mr. Crabtree," whined Gus Coulter.

"Then who did?"

"I—er——" Coulter glanced at Pepper, who quickly doubled up his fist. "I—er—I don't know."

"All stay in—for one full hour," snapped the angry teacher, and then went on with the studies.

"We ought to tell on Ditmore," whispered Ritter, to Dan Baxter.

"Never mind—that crowd will catch it tomorrow," answered the bully of the Hall.

"It was too rich for anything," said Andy to

Pepper, when they were out of school at last.
"My, but old Crabby was mad!"

"Coulter wanted to tell on me, but he didn't dare."

"He respects your fist, that's why," put in Dale.

"Those chaps have something up their sleeve," said Jack, with a grave shake of his head.
"Everybody keep on the watch, is my advice."

"We'll watch 'em," answered Pepper. But the watch was not close enough, as later events proved.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BOATHOUSE FIRE

ON the following evening Pepper was getting ready to go to bed when, on passing through the hallway, a folded sheet of paper dropped upon his head:

"Hullo, what's this?" he murmured and looked up to the floor above, but could see nobody. He unfolded the sheet and read the following:

"To Pepper Ditmore and Jack Ruddy: Go down to the old, disused boathouse at once if you want to hear something to your advantage.

"A FRIEND."

"This is certainly queer," said the Imp to himself. "I wonder who wrote it?"

He sought out the young major and showed him the communication. Jack read it with care. It was written in a loose and evidently a disguised hand.

"Maybe it is some sort of a trick—to get us to

the old boathouse, Pep," said Jack, after a moment's thought.

"Don't you think it best to go?"

"Oh, yes, we can go. If it is one of Baxter's tricks I'll show him I am not afraid of him."

"Shall we take the others along?"

"This note is for you and me only. Are you afraid?"

"Not a bit."

"Then come on—we have just time enough," said the young major, glancing at a clock on the wall.

Slipping on their overcoats and donning their caps, they ran to a side door of the building. They were soon out into the night without anybody seeing them depart but the boy upstairs who had dropped the note. He chuckled to himself and then ran to a window at the end of the long hallway.

"Something will be doing pretty soon now," he said to himself, as he made a signal from the window.

All unconscious of the trap that had been set for them, Jack and Pepper hurried towards the old, disused boathouse. It was a dark night, with a suggestion of either rain or snow in the air.

"Go slow," whispered Jack, as they came close



IN A TWINKLING THE SNOWBALLS BEGAN TO FLY

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to the building. "We don't want to run into any trouble."

"They soon found themselves at the side of the building. All was dark, so far as they could see.

"I don't see anybody," whispered Pepper.

"Let us go inside—just to show somebody that we are not afraid," suggested his chum.

They pushed open the door. A strong smell of cigarette smoke greeted them. Then Pepper stepped on an empty bottle and almost fell flat.

"That smoking and drinking crowd has been here again," said the fun-loving youth.

"Look! look!" ejaculated Jack, pointing to a corner of the boathouse.

Pepper gazed in the direction and gave a gasp. And well he might, for as if by magic there came a spurt of flame, and some dead leaves and dry wood caught on the instant.

"Hi! what does that mean?" called out Jack. "Take care, or you'll set this place on fire!"

No answer came back. The spurts of flame increased, and in a twinkling the old boathouse was on fire in half a dozen places!

"Jack, we must get out of here!" exclaimed Pepper. "I don't like this at all!"

"Neither do I. Come on!"

They turned, to find the door shut behind them. They tried it.

"Something is against it!" ejaculated the young major. "We are shut in!"

"Push!" was the answer, and both pushed with all of their might. The door gave way some, but not enough.

"Again!" said Jack, and now they shoved as never before. In the meantime the flames were increasing with marvelous rapidity.

"We must get out, or we'll be burnt up!" said Pepper, and a final attack was made on the door, and it went back, showing that a heavy timber had been placed against it.

"They are out!" they heard somebody cry, and then they saw three forms sneaking around to the back of the school building.

"Fire! fire! fire!" was the cry from Putnam Hall, and from the school poured some students and several teachers, including George Strong.

"It's the old boathouse," said George Strong. "I wonder how it caught?"

"Ha! here come Ruddy and Ditmore!" exclaimed Josiah Crabtree. "They have been down there!"

"Fire! fire!" yelled Pepper and Jack. "The old boathouse is burning up!"

The alarm was soon a general one, and it was

not long before Captain Putnam appeared upon the scene.

"I am afraid the old building is doomed," said the master of Putnam Hall. He was the calmest man present. "The Hall hose will not reach to this spot. We can try our buckets, though."

Some weeks before the boys had formed a bucket brigade, as it is termed, and they had the drill down to perfection. At the word from Captain Putnam they ran for their buckets and formed a line from the barn to the burning building. At the barn there was a big tub of water, and this was kept filled by some, while others passed along the buckets. Thus an almost steady stream of water was poured on the growing fire.

"I say, let us use snowballs!" cried one cadet, who was not in the bucket line, and in a twinkling the snowballs began to fly.

"We are going to get the best of that fire yet," said Dale, passing the buckets to George Strong, who was throwing the water on the conflagration.

"It looks so," answered the teacher.

It soon began to snow. The flakes were thick and wet, and this put an additional damper on the fire. Presently the flames died down and ten minutes later the last spark was extinguished; and the excitement came practically to an end.

Everybody wanted to know how the fire had

started. It soon became noised around that Jack and Pepper had been seen coming from the burning building.

"What have you to say to this, Major Ruddy?" asked Captain Putnam, in rather a stern voice.

Jack knew not what to say. He looked at Pepper.

"Come, answer me," went on the master of the academy.

"We—er—we went out to see if we could find some other boys," said Jack.

"We got a note," put in Pepper. He placed his hand in his pocket and drew out the folded sheet of paper. "We—well, I declare!"

"What is it, Ditmore?"

Pepper did not answer, for he was staring at the sheet. It was almost blank, only a few traces of letters remaining on it!

"Ditmore, answer me!" came from Captain Putnam, and now his voice was more stern than ever.

"Why, I—er—look at that!" and he held out the sheet.

The captain glanced at the paper.

"I see nothing but paper."

"Yes, but it—er—it had something written on it awhile ago," stammered Pepper.

"Maybe you've got the wrong paper," suggested Jack.

"I don't think so." The Imp began to search his pockets. "No, this is the right one."

"Then it was written in evaporating ink," said the young major. "It's a trick," he murmured to his chum.

"Faded out, and so soon," murmured Pepper. "That stumps me!"

"Why do not you two boys explain?" went on Captain Putnam.

"I do not believe they can explain," put in Josiah Crabtree, who stood near. "They have been up to mischief. More than likely they set the boathouse on fire."

"It isn't so!" cried Jack.

"We didn't even have a light."

"Mr. Crabtree, let the boys explain," said the captain, stiffly.

"Captain Putnam, I think I can explain," retorted the teacher. "To-day I made a discovery."

"Well?"

"Some of the students have been in the habit of going down to the old boathouse to smoke and to drink."

"To smoke and to drink!" cried the master of the Hall. "You are sure of this?"

"I am, sir."

"Why did you not report to me at once?"

"I did not find it out until this afternoon. I was on my way to speak to you about it when the alarm of fire rang out."

"Ahem! And you think, Mr. Crabtree——?" The captain paused suggestively.

"I think Ruddy and Ditmore are guilty. They were smoking and they set the building on fire, perhaps by accident."

"Mr. Crabtree, there isn't a word of truth in that!" cried Jack, his temper rising.

"Ha! don't contradict me!" cried Josiah Crabtree.

"But we shall contradict you," said Pepper. "We have not been smoking, neither have we been drinking."

"But you were down to the old boathouse," put in Captain Putnam.

"We admit that," said Jack. "We went down there for a certain purpose."

"What was that purpose?"

"I can't tell you, exactly."

"We were looking for some other students," said Pepper. "Some fellows who are enemies of ours."

"Did you find them?"

"No."

"Was the building on fire when you got there?"

"We didn't see any fire."

"Hum!" The master of the Hall mused for a moment. "How did the fire start?"

"It sprang up all at once," said Pepper. "We got scared and started to run away. Then we found the door closed, and we had a big job getting out of the place."

"That is a fine story to tell," sneered Josiah Crabtree. "Captain Putnam, if I were you, I'd place them in a room by themselves, while we make an investigation."

"But, Mr. Crabtree——"

"I am certain we shall learn a good deal," went on the assistant teacher. And then he whispered something into the ear of the master of the Hall.

"If you think best," said Captain Putnam. "Come with me, boys," he added, to Jack and Pepper, and led the way to the school, and then to his private office.

"Captain Putnam——" began Jack.

"I will listen to what you have to say later, Major Ruddy," said the master of the Hall. "For the present both of you must remain here."

Then Captain Putnam walked out, locking the door after him, and leaving Jack and Pepper in a decidedly unsettled state of mind.

CHAPTER IX

UNDER SUSPICION

"WHAT do you make of this, Jack?"

"I give it up."

"Something is in the wind."

"I know that. If possible, old Crabtree is going to get us into trouble."

"Not Crabtree alone."

"What do you mean?"

"This is the work of Dan Baxter and his crowd. Don't forget the three fellows we saw sneaking from the old boathouse."

"That's so! Do you suppose they set the place on fire?"

"I do—either by accident or design."

"You don't suppose they meant to burn us up?"

"Oh, no, they knew we could get out. But it would take time, and they wanted to detain us, so that we'd be found down there."

"Well, we were found, and now we're in a mess over it."

After that both cadets looked at the sheet of paper once more.

"The writing has entirely evaporated," said Pepper. "I can't see a scratch."

"Have you any idea who dropped the note?"

"Not the slightest."

"Perhaps it was a friend who wanted us to learn what the Baxter crowd was up to."

"I don't think so. I think the whole thing is a plot against us."

The boys talked the matter over for some time, but could make no progress towards a solution of the mystery.

"If Baxter did it, it was done to get square because we spoilt their feast," said Jack.

"No doubt of that."

"Shall we squeal on them?"

"I don't want to be a tale-bearer."

"Neither do I."

For fully an hour nobody came near them. They heard the students retire, and later on heard a murmur of voices in the hallway. Then Captain Putnam appeared.

"Both of you will come with me," he said, coldly.

"But, captain——" began Jack.

"It is too late to discuss the situation to-night," cut in the master of the Hall. "We will talk it

over in the morning, and then I will decide what is to be done."

He would not listen to another word, and meekly they followed him out of the office and down a side hallway to where there was a small room.

This room had been designed for stores, but it was almost empty. The two boys saw that in it had been placed two cots and a quantity of blankets.

"You will remain here all night," said Captain Putnam. "There is a pitcher of water for you." And then he withdrew, leaving them to themselves. The door was locked and bolted, and they heard the captain walk rapidly away.

"Well, what do you think of that?" declared Pepper, gazing around blankly. "Are we prisoners?"

"It certainly looks like it, Pep."

"And for nothing at all! It's an outrage, Jack!"

"Captain Putnam appeared to be very angry."

"Yes, and he wouldn't listen to a word! I never dreamed it of him, never!"

"Well, one thing is certain—we've got to stay here until morning. Look at the window."

The blinds were closed, and over them had been nailed several heavy slats. The room was rather

cold, and they had only a small lamp for illumination.

When Pepper awoke he thought somebody was whistling in his ear. He listened intently and soon discovered that the whistling came through the keyhole of the door.

"Who is there?" he asked, rising.

"Is that you, Pep?" came in Andy's voice.

"Yes."

"Is Jack there, too?"

"Yes." And now the Imp aroused his chum.

"What is it all about anyway? Our crowd is all upset over it," continued Andy, in a low voice.

Pepper and Jack told as much as they knew, and their acrobatic friend listened with interest.

"I'd like to let you out, but the door is locked and I haven't any key," went on Andy.

"Never mind, we can stay here just as well," said Jack.

"Something was doing in our dormitory too," went on Andy. "We started to go to bed, when old Crabtree came up and ordered us out. Then he went in and shut the door."

"What did he do there?"

"I think he made some kind of a search. Presently he called for Captain Putnam, and then both stayed in the room quarter of an hour. After that we were told to go to bed."

"Something is certainly wrong," mused Pepper. "Well, we'll have to await developments, that's all."

It was too cold for Andy to remain in the hall long, and soon he went back to his dormitory, and Pepper and Jack went to sleep as before.

At eight o'clock in the morning Peleg Snuggers came in, with a big tray containing the boys' breakfast.

"What! are we to remain here?" cried Jack.

"I dunno," answered the general-utility man of Putnam Hall. "I was ordered to bring your breakfast, that's all."

"Who ordered it?"

"Mr. Crabtree."

"Does Captain Putnam know of it?" asked Jack.

"Captain Putnam went away at six o'clock this morning. Had some special business in Rochester, I think."

"Went away!" echoed Jack. "Then old Crabby—I mean Mr. Crabtree, is in charge."

"That's it."

"Humph! Pep, that won't be to our advantage."

"I know it. He hates us."

"I think he hates most o' you young gents," whispered Peleg Snuggers, who had no great love for the teacher in question.

"You tell Mr. Crabtree that we want to see him," said Jack.

"It won't do no good."

"Never mind. You tell him we insist upon seeing him," put in Pepper.

Peleg Snuggers placed the breakfast on a stand and withdrew, locking the door as before.

"Rather a slim meal," observed the young major, looking at what had been brought.

"He is going to starve us as well as keep us prisoners," was the Imp's answer.

As both boys were hungry it did not take them long to stow away everything in sight. Then both began to walk around the cold cell, in order to keep warm.

"This is outrageous!" cried Pepper, at last. "I am not going to stand it another minute!" And going to the door he began to hammer upon it loudly. Jack, also out of sorts, did the same.

The racket was soon heard in the classrooms, and presently Josiah Crabtree came rushing to the place, a heavy switch in his hand.

"Hi! hi! stop that noise!" thundered the assistant teacher. "Stop it, I say!" And he threw open the door and confronted the pair, with snapping eyes and with a face red from indignation.

As soon as the door was opened Jack and Pepper stopped kicking and pounding. Both faced the instructor fearlessly.

"What do you mean by such a noise?" demanded Josiah Crabtree, after an ominous pause.

"We wanted to attract attention," answered Pepper, calmly.

"I want you to keep quiet!"

"Mr. Crabtree, will you tell us why we are prisoners here?" asked Jack.

"You are prisoners because you have disobeyed the rules of this institution," snapped the instructor, and there was a certain gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"How have we disobeyed the rules?"

"You know well enough."

"We don't know," came from Pepper.

"Don't contradict, Ditmore! Captain Putnam and myself have found you out."

"Won't you please explain?" asked Jack, as calmly as he could.

"Well, in the first place, you are responsible for the fire at the boathouse."

"No! no!" came from both boys.

"We have made a rigid investigation," returned Josiah Crabtree. "It is useless to deny it," he continued. "But that is not the worst of it, in the eyes of myself and Captain Putnam."

"Well, what is the worst?" asked Jack, curiously, and wondering what was coming.

"Both of you went down to the old boathouse to smoke and drink."

"I deny that flatly," said the young major.

"So do I," added Pepper.

"Denials will do you no good. We have the evidence," returned Josiah Crabtree, and once again his rather fishy eyes showed a gleam of triumph.

"What evidence have you?" demanded Jack.

"After we locked you up here, I suggested to the captain that we search your dormitory. This was done, and we have uncovered your secrets. The captain is amazed, and so am I. We did not dream that any cadet at this school would be guilty of such a thing."

"Guilty of what?" asked Jack and Pepper, in a breath.

"Guilty of such bad habits. We went into your lockers and your trunks, and we discovered two bottles of liquor, eight packages of cigarettes, and three packs of playing-cards, all belonging to you two students. You know our rules. You have broken them, and you must either be punished or else be dismissed from this school!"

CHAPTER X

FROM CELLAR TO ATTIC

FOR the moment after Josiah Crabtree made this declaration Jack and Pepper were so amazed that they could not speak. They stared at the teacher as if they had not heard aright.

"Do you mean to say you found such things in our trunks and lockers?" asked the young major, at last.

"I certainly do, Ruddy."

"It's a—a trick!" burst out Pepper. "A mean, rascally trick!"

"No, there was no trick about it," answered Josiah Crabtree.

"But, Mr. Crabtree, there must be some mistake," faltered Jack. "I do not drink or smoke or play cards, and neither does Pepper. Surely you have made a mistake."

"No mistake about it, I tell you. I found the things as plain as day, and Captain Putnam saw them too. You had the things hidden pretty well, but our search was thorough. After the fire I

suspected you at once, for I saw the evidence of smoking and drinking around the burnt building. You may as well confess. It will do no good to put on an innocent front."

"Mr. Crabtree, will you listen to me?" asked Pepper, half desperately.

"If you wish to confess, yes."

"I have nothing to confess."

"Then I do not care to listen. You are a pair of bad boys, and in the absence of Captain Putnam I am bound to make an example of you."

"If Captain Putnam was here he would listen to us," said Jack.

"I am capable of taking charge of this affair," answered the teacher, coldly. A little brief authority always made him strong-headed.

"I repeat, I am guilty of no wrongdoing," said Jack, simply. "There is some mistake somewhere."

"And I am innocent, too," added Pepper.

"After this, I want you two boys to behave yourselves," resumed Josiah Crabtree. "If you don't——"

"What then?" asked Jack.

"I'll make you."

"We don't want to stay here," said Pepper. "It's a beastly place and we'll catch our death of cold."

"You shall stay here."

"I protest!" cried Jack.

"Ruddy, it will do no good, I tell you. And let me tell you something more. Your conduct is unworthy of an officer. After this, you shall be a private, nothing more."

"You are going to take my majorship away from me!" gasped Jack.

"Yes."

The boy's heart sank within him. This was the unkindest cut of all.

"It's dirt mean!" cried Pepper. "Jack, for two pins I'd write home about this."

"Yes, and leave Putnam Hall," added the deposed major.

"You two boys will behave yourselves!" roared Josiah Crabtree. "If you make any more trouble I'll show you a thing or two!"

With this the teacher went out, banging and locking the door behind him.

Jack and Pepper felt hurt and angry. They had done nothing wrong, and did not consider that they were being treated fairly.

The forenoon dragged by slowly and both boys were chilled. Growing desperate, Pepper began to hammer on the door again and his chum followed suit.

For fully quarter of an hour nobody paid atten-

tention to the noise, and they were on the point of stopping the racket when Josiah Crabtree again appeared, followed by Peleg Snuggers and another man, who did occasional jobs around Putnam Hall.

"Hold out your hands," said the teacher, grimly; and almost before they knew it, Jack and Pepper were handcuffed. Then the teacher slipped the key of the handcuffs into his pocket.

"This is a high-handed proceeding," said Jack.

"I believe you objected to the cold," said the teacher, ignoring the remark.

"We did—I am half frozen," answered Pepper.

"Then come, and I'll provide you with a warmer place," was the answer.

It would have been useless to resist in the presence of the three men, and so the boys marched out of the storeroom and along the hallway. Soon they came to a cellar door.

"Are you going to put us down in the cellar?" cried Jack.

"March, and do not ask any more questions," said Josiah Crabtree.

The boys tried to argue, but the assistant teacher would not listen. Down into the cellar went the party and walked along until they came to a square stone room that was built close to one of the big heaters.

"You won't freeze here," said the teacher, and shoved them inside. "Now, if you make any more noise, you shall not have a mouthful of dinner."

Again the door was closed and locked on the two unfortunates. They heard the others hurry away, and faced each other in the gloom.

"This is the worst yet," said Pepper. "It's a regular dungeon cell!"

"It is an outrage and I shall not stand for it," was his chum's comment. "Phew! how hot it is! That furnace is a regular bake-oven!"

"First he freezes us and then he bakes us," muttered Pepper. "Oh, but he is a hard-hearted wretch!"

"Here is something to make you feel better," said Jack, when he felt certain nobody was watching them. "Hold out your hands, Pep."

The Imp did so and Jack commenced to feel of the lock of the handcuffs. Soon Pepper was at liberty.

"However did you do it, Jack?" he questioned.

"I watched my chance and took the key from old Crabby's pocket."

"Good for you!"

"Now unfasten my bracelets, will you?"

"Certainly."

With their hands at liberty, the boys felt a

trifle better. But the semi-darkness and the heat did not suit them at all. Besides this, the hot stone room was full of a dry dust that set them to coughing.

"I'd like to put old Crabtree in this place," muttered Jack.

"I wonder if we can't get out, Jack?"

"What good will it do?"

"A lot of good. We can remain out of Crabtree's reach until Captain Putnam gets back. Then we can demand a hearing."

"I don't see how you are going to get out."

"Have you got a match?"

"Nary a one."

"Let us explore in the dark then. Start at the door. I'll go to the right and you can go to the left."

This was done, and they went over the stone walls with care. Nothing in the way of an opening presented itself.

"Now let us try the flooring above," said Pepper.

"How can we reach it?"

There was a bench in the room, and they turned this up on one end. Then Pepper boosted his chum to the top. Jack felt around with care.

"Here's a crack in the floor," said he, presently. "Hullo!"

"What's up now?" queried the Imp.

"I saw a streak of light and then it suddenly disappeared. I think—— There it is again!"

Jack turned his eye upward, and now Pepper saw the light also. It lasted about half a minute and then disappeared, and the boys heard the slamming of a door.

"I know what it is now," said Jack. "The flooring above is that of some storeroom or closet. Somebody opened the door, letting in some light. Then the door was closed again."

"Maybe we can get up into the room or closet. Are any of the boards loose?"

"I'll try them and find out."

Jack began to press upward and soon found a board that was loose at one end. He worked at it and soon had an opening large enough to admit the passage of his body.

"Give me your hand," he whispered to Pepper. "Don't make any noise."

Soon the Imp was standing beside his chum on the upturned end of the bench. Then both crawled through the opening above. As Pepper followed Jack the bench fell over with a crash.

"Quick, put the board down! Somebody may come!" ejaculated Jack, and they replaced the flooring of the closet in which they now found themselves. It was partly filled with clothing for

outdoor wear, and also held rubbers, rubber boots, and umbrellas.

The cadets waited, and as nobody came they gradually breathed more freely. They tried the door to the closet, to find it unlocked.

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Pepper, after a pause.

"We'll have to get out of this, that's certain," answered Jack.

They tiptoed their way out of the closet and found themselves in the main hallway of the academy. Then they ran up the front stairs and into their dormitory.

"I wish I knew when Captain Putnam will get back," observed Jack, after they had looked around, to find the sleeping quarters empty.

Below they could hear the students returning to their classrooms, having had their midday meal.

"We've lost our dinners, that's certain," said Pepper, with a sigh. "If only we had some of Dan Baxter's stuff here now, it wouldn't go half bad, eh?"

"Do you know what I think, Pep?"

"Well?"

"I think Dan Baxter put up a job on us."

"About that liquor, cigarettes, and cards?"

"Yes."

"Would he be mean enough to do it?"

"I think so. Remember, he was terribly angry over that feast affair."

"Oh, I know that. If he put up a job on us I'd like to prove it."

"That may be a hard thing to do. No doubt he covered up his tracks well."

The boys remained in the dormitory for some time and then stole to the rear of the Hall and down a back stairs. This brought them close to the kitchen.

"If we could only get into the pantry," whispered Pepper. "I am going to try it!" he added, with sudden determination.

"I am with you," answered his chum.

Watching their chance, they crossed the kitchen and entered the pantry, on the shelves of which rested a variety of good things. There was a basket handy, and into it they put such things as they desired. Some maids came into the kitchen, but then went back to the mess-hall, in one corner of which they were now having their own dinner.

"Now is our chance!" cried Jack, softly, and once more they crossed the kitchen and made for the stairs. In a few minutes they were on the upper floor, and there they almost ran straight into Dale Blackmore.

"Hullo!" cried Dale, staring as if he saw two ghosts. "I thought you were prisoners."

"We were, but we escaped," explained Jack. "You won't tell on us, will you, Dale?"

"Me tell on you?" said the other cadet, reproachfully. "Not by a jugful!"

"Do you know when Captain Putnam is coming back?"

"Not until to-morrow morning, so I heard."

Pepper and Jack looked at each other.

"What shall we do next?" asked Pepper.

"Let us stay in hiding until the captain gets back."

So it was decided, and Dale told them of a vacant room on the top floor where they might make themselves comfortable in the meantime.

"It's got a bed in it and all," said he. "You can lock yourselves in and I'll keep you posted."

They talked the matter over a few minutes and then went to the room. It contained no heater, but the main chimney of the Hall was at one end, making it fairly comfortable. From a window they could get a view of the road leading to Cedarville.

"Make yourselves at home," said Dale, on departing. "I'll try to keep you posted."

CHAPTER XI

JOSIAH CRABTREE'S TROUBLES

THERE was a key in the lock of the door, and the two cadets locked themselves in. Then they proceeded to unpack the basket of good things, and sitting on the edge of the bed, began to satisfy their hunger.

"This certainly beats the cellar," said Jack, munching some cold roast beef and a biscuit.

"Yes, and we can keep our eyes on the road below," answered his chum. "If the captain comes I believe in reporting to him at once."

"So do I."

As they had nothing else to do, they took their time eating, and then placed what was left to one side, for supper and a possible breakfast. Then Pepper strolled to the window and gazed down on the campus below.

"Well, I never!" he cried.

"What's up now?"

"There are Crabtree and Snuggers looking all around the place! I'll wager a bun to a bakery that they think we have run away from the Hall!"

Jack looked out also, and both boys saw the teacher and the general-utility man walk all around the campus and then disappear in the direction of the gymnasium.

"I hope they have a good time looking for us," observed Pepper, with a broad grin.

"Maybe they'll come up here next."

"If they do we'll have to lay low."

Nearly an hour passed, and then they heard footsteps in the hall outside. Instantly both became quiet as mice.

"They don't seem to be around here," they heard Peleg Snuggers remark.

"Let us look in all the rooms," answered Josiah Crabtree.

The boys almost held their breath as they heard the door tried.

"This is locked up," said Snuggers.

"Let me see," answered the assistant teacher, and they heard his hand upon the knob. "Have you a key, Snuggers?"

"No, sir."

There was a brief pause.

"Boys, are you in there?" called out Josiah Crabtree. "If you are, answer me."

A deathlike silence followed. Jack and Pepper scarcely dared to breathe.

"They couldn't git up here nohow, Mr. Crab-

tree," said the general-utility man. "Somebody would be sure to see 'em."

"I don't know about that. Boys that will crawl through the flooring of a closet will do almost anything," grumbled the teacher. "Who has the key to this room?"

"Most likely Mrs. Green."

Mrs. Green was the matron of the Hall, she having charge of all the female help and also doing a great deal for the small boys in the institution. At the mention of her name the hearts of the cadets sank.

"Mr. Crabtree!" called a voice, from the floor below.

"What is it?" returned the assistant teacher.

"You are wanted in the office, sir—a gentleman to see you."

"Who is it?"

"Gave the name of Simon—Andrew Simon."

"Really! My old friend Simon!" murmured the teacher. "Snuggers, I will go below at once. We can continue this search at another time." And down the stairs went Josiah Crabtree and the general-utility man after him.

"Phew! but that was a narrow escape," murmured Jack. "If they had gotten in here our cake would have been dough."

After that the boys found the time hanging

heavily on their hands. They talked the situation over in a low tone, but could reach no satisfactory conclusion.

Presently it grew darker and began to rain, the storm keeping up far into the night. This made a noise on the roof, so they could talk with but little danger of being heard.

At supper-time they partook of some more of the eatables in the basket and then prepared to make themselves comfortable for the night. They were resting on the bed when they heard a low whistle at the door.

"Hullo!" came in Andy's voice.

They unlocked the door, and there stood Andy and Stuffer, each with some supper done up in a napkin. Andy also had a candle and some matches. Dale had told them where to come.

"Had a time getting this here," said Stuffer, after the candle had been lit.

"Old Crabtree is nearly crazy, thinking you have run away from the Hall," said Andy. "He and Snuggers have been hunting all over for you. They even sent word to Cedarville."

"Well, let Crabby worry—he deserves it," grumbled Pepper. "Say, it's mighty good of you to bring this," he continued.

"Here are a couple of new magazines, too," said Stuffer, handing them over. "I got them from

the library. They'll help you to pass away the time."

Andy and Stuffer did not dare to remain upstairs long, and soon left, and then the door was locked as before and Jack hung his handkerchief over the keyhole. The curtain to the window was drawn down tightly, so that the candlelight might not be seen by anybody outside.

Several hours went by and the academy became quiet. Both boys had read for awhile and also taken several naps. Then Pepper started up.

"Jack, I've an idea!"

"What now, Pep?"

"Let us go downstairs after old Crabby is to bed and play some trick on him."

"That would be all right—if we didn't get caught. But if he catches us it will go so much harder with us when it comes to a settlement."

"I don't care," said the Imp, recklessly. "We may as well be hung for sheep as lambs."

They talked the matter over, and at last concluded to go below. The candle was extinguished and the door opened with care. They crawled cautiously to the top of the stairs and looked down.

"Everybody is in bed by this time," whispered Pepper.

They waited a little, to make certain. Then

they crept down and made their way to the door of the apartment which the assistant teacher occupied.

"He's asleep and snoring," said Jack, and told the truth.

They tried the door and found it unlocked. With extreme care they entered the room. A dim light was burning in a corner of the apartment, casting shadows in all directions. Covered up on the bed lay Josiah Crabtree, flat on his back and with a nightcap on his head.

Their first move was to transfer the key of the door from the inside to the outside. This done, Pepper got a washbowl of cold water and placed it on the floor beside the bed. Then they took several of the chairs and placed them on the floor sideways, and put down several piles of books near by.

"Now open the window wide," whispered Pepper. "But be careful or he may wake up."

The window was opened top and bottom.

"All ready, Jack?"

"Yes." And the light was put out.

"Then together—quick!"

The boys stood at the foot of the bed. Each took a firm hold of the numerous coverings and gave them a sharp jerk. Off they came, and in

a twinkling the lads made for the door, taking the blankets and spread with them. They locked the door from the outside and scooted for the next floor, throwing the things they carried in a corner out of sight.

Josiah Crabtree awoke with a start and uttered a low cry of alarm.

"Hi—er—what does this mean?" he cried, and sat bolt upright. "Where are the covers? Help! Thieves! Robbers!"

He leaped out of bed and down into the cold water went his left foot. He gave a yell of fright and the next instant stumbled over one of the chairs and went headlong among the piles of books. As he was only half awake he was more alarmed than ever.

"Help! Something is wrong here! Thieves! Robbers!" he bawled. "What does this mean! Oh! oh!"

He tried to get up, and fell over a second chair. Then he bumped into a stand and brought down some more books and some photographs. He yelled louder than ever, and finally reaching the door, tried to open it.

"Open the door! Who locked me in? Wake up, somebody! They must be robbing the house! Thieves! Robbers! Help!"

His cries rang out through the Hall, and, soon

George Strong and many others, including cadets, were awakened.

"Mr. Crabtree, what is the matter?" asked George Strong, coming to the door, clad in a dressing-gown and carrying a pistol.

"Let me out! There is a—er—I don't know what is going on! Let me out!"

"There is no key here."

"My key is also gone. Somebody has locked me in. They—er—a—oh!" And in moving around Josiah Crabtree stumbled again and sat down on the sharp edge of a chair. "This is—er—outrageous!"

By this time George Strong had brought out a bunch of keys. One fitted the lock, and the door was speedily opened. There stood the confused teacher, trembling in every limb.

"Where are they?" he panted.

"Who?"

"The—er—the robbers who visited my room."

"I have seen no robbers, Mr. Crabtree. What did they steal?"

"Took my bedclothes, for one thing," growled the assistant teacher. He was recovering somewhat from his fright. "Wait till I make a light."

He managed to find a match, but not before he had hit his toe on a pile of books and bumped

into one of the chairs again. Then the light was lit and Josiah Crabtree put on his bath-robe.

"Look there, and there, and there!" he snarled, pointing to the coverless bed, the washbowl on the floor, and the overturned chairs and other disarranged things. "Doesn't that look like burglars,—or—something, Mr. Strong?"

"I am afraid some of the students have been playing a trick on you," said the second assistant teacher, with a faint smile showing on his face.

"A trick?" gasped Josiah Crabtree.

"Where's the robber!" cried Andy, coming up and realizing at once what had occurred. "Let me catch him!"

"That's right, catch him by all means," put in Dale.

"Maybe he tried to murder poor Mr. Crabtree," put in Stuffer.

"Sure, Mr. Crabtree, did he hurt yez very much?" asked Emerald, with mock sympathy.

"I wonder if there really was a burglar?" said Dan Baxter, coming to the scene.

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Mumps, and the toady began to shiver from fright.

"There he is, Mumps," said Andy, coming close. "He's aiming a pistol at you!" and the acrobatic youth pointed down the semi-dark hallway.

"Don't shoot!" screamed Mumps. "Please don't shoot me!" And he caught hold of Dan Baxter for protection.

"Let go," said the bully. "He's only fooling you. I don't think there is any burglar.

"Oh, dear! I wish we were sure," whined Mumps.

CHAPTER XII

FACING THE MUSIC

"THIS is outrageous!" stormed Josiah Crabtree.

"It is certainly too bad," commented George Strong.

"If some of the students played this trick on me they should be—be hung for it!"

"Oh, not quite as bad as that, Mr. Crabtree."

"It is as bad—it's worse!" stormed the unreasonable teacher. "I am not going to permit it."

To this the second assistant teacher said nothing.

"Boys, who did this?" demanded Josiah Crabtree, eyeing the assembled crowd with great severity. "Answer me at once."

"Didn't you say it was a burglar?" asked Andy, meekly.

"I thought he called out thieves," came from Stuffer.

"I—er—I may have done that, but I am now satisfied somebody has been playing tricks," said

Josiah Crabtree. "I intend to discover the offender and punish him severely."

"Mr. Crabtree, I didn't do it, I assure you," piped in Mumps.

"No, Mumpsy dear wouldn't do such a wicked thing," came from a student in the rear, and this caused a snicker.

"I demand to know what has been done with the bedclothing," resumed the irate teacher.

"Hullo, who has Mr. Crabtree's bedclothes?" sang out Andy. "Come, don't all speak at once."

"Here you are!" cried Hogan, and threw the bundle at Andy's head.

"Where were they?" cried Josiah Crabtree.

"Right here, in the corner," answered the Irish cadet. "Sure it's a queer happening entirely, so it is," he added, soberly, but with a twinkle in his merry eyes.

Try his best Josiah Crabtree could not learn who had been guilty of disturbing him, and at last ordered the cadets to retire. Then he straightened out his room and went to bed again, this time making certain to lock the door and placing a chair against it.

From the upper landing Jack and Pepper saw and heard something of what went on and laughed heartily. Then they too retired, and

slept soundly until the morning bell awoke them.

"Well, we haven't got to hurry, that's one comfort," observed the Imp, as he proceeded to dress leisurely. "Jack, our time's our own."

"Yes, but we must be ready to go to Captain Putnam as soon as he arrives," was the answer. "We want him to understand that we are willing to submit to what he does, but not to Crabtree's harshness."

They heard the cadets march to the mess-hall for breakfast. A little later a carriage came along the road towards the Hall.

"There is the captain now!" cried Jack, who was on the watch.

"Let us go down and present ourselves as soon as possible—before Crabtree can tell his story," said Pepper.

Disposing of the basket and what was left of the eating, they stole downstairs and then to the front of the Hall. They were just in time to see Captain Putnam walk towards his office. Beside him was Josiah Crabtree.

"Ran away!" the master of the academy was saying. "You are sure of this?"

"I am, sir," answered the assistant teacher. "We hunted everywhere for them."

"What made them do it?"

"They got scared, I imagine."

"You did not mistreat them in any way, Mr. Crabtree?"

"No! no! On the contrary, I think I used them too good."

"Oh, listen to that!" whispered Pepper. "What an old fraud he is!"

"Well, I will listen to the story in detail after the school has been opened," said Captain Putnam, after a pause, and then he entered his office, while Josiah Crabtree passed on to one of the classrooms.

"Now come on, Pep," said Jack. "Let us put on a bold front and face the music."

"I'm with you."

They marched down the stairs and knocked on the door of the office. There was a rustling of papers, and then the voice of Captain Putnam bade them enter.

The master of the Hall was looking over a mass of legal documents. He stared at the boys in considerable astonishment.

"Why, I understood you two students had run away!" he exclaimed.

"No, sir, we did not run away, Captain Putnam," answered Jack. "We have not been outside of this building."

"Then where have you been?"

"In one of the vacant rooms at the top, sir," answered Pepper.

"What made you hide away there?" And the voice of the master of the Hall grew stern.

"We got away and hid because we did not like the way Mr. Crabtree treated us," said Jack. "At first we were put in a room where we were nearly frozen, and then he put us down in the cellar, close to the big furnace, and nearly baked us."

"We didn't come here to be put in the cellar," put in Pepper. "Especially when we have done no wrong."

"So you were put in the cellar? I did not know that," and now the captain's face softened a little.

"Captain Putnam, I think we are not being treated fairly," said Jack, earnestly. "We have done no wrong, and is it right to condemn us without a hearing?"

"I expect to listen to your story, Ruddy, and I will also listen to what Ditmore has to say."

"Will you listen now?"

"I will be at leisure in an hour. You may come to this office then. Have you had breakfast?"

"We had a little," and Pepper smiled faintly as he answered the question.

"Then go to the mess-room and get the meal.

If you see Mr. Crabtree tell him that I said you were to report to me."

"We will," answered both cadets, and left a moment later.

"I think we'll come out all right," said Jack, on the way to the dining-room. "I don't think he'll stand for Crabtree's putting us down in the cellar."

"I reckon that's our strong point."

Inside of an hour after the boys left the office Josiah Crabtree came in and sat down.

"Now I will listen to what you have to say about Ruddy and Ditmore," said the master of the Hall.

Josiah Crabtree told his tale, with many exaggerations. According to what he said, Jack and Pepper acted in a most vicious manner.

"They are natural-born young rascals," said the assistant teacher. "If we can locate them, we must make examples of them, Captain Putnam."

"Perhaps they are not so bad as you think, Mr. Crabtree."

"They are every bit as bad—maybe worse. They ran away because they were afraid to face the consequences of their misdoings."

"But they did not run away."

"Wha—er—what?"

"They did not run away."

At this announcement the jaw of the assistant instructor dropped.

"If they didn't run away where are they?"

At that moment came another knock on the office door.

"Come in," said the captain, and Jack entered, followed by Pepper.

"Well, I never!" murmured Josiah Crabtree. "Where did you come from, you young villains!"

"Gently, Mr. Crabtree," interposed the captain.

"Mr. Crabtree, I am not a villain and I don't want you or anybody else to call me one," said Jack, hotly.

"Ha! don't talk to me!" spluttered the assistant teacher.

"Mr. Crabtree, I will examine the two young gentlemen in private," said Captain Putnam, decisively. "I will thank you to take charge of the classes for the present. I will send word when I wish to see you again."

This was a strong hint that he was not wanted, and with rather bad grace the assistant teacher retired.

"Now, Ruddy, tell me your story," went on Captain Putnam. "Tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"I will, sir," answered Jack; and in a plain, straightforward manner told how Pepper had

come to him with the strange note, and how they had hurried down to the old boathouse. Then he related how they had seen the fire start up and found themselves locked in, and how they had gotten out and given the alarm.

"We saw those cigarette butts there once before, and also an empty liquor bottle," he added. "But I do not remember that we saw any playing-cards."

"Have you anything to add to this story?" asked the captain of Pepper.

"No, sir, excepting to say that Jack has told the exact truth, Captain Putnam. We had nothing to do with the fire and nothing to do with the cigarettes or drink."

"What about the cigarettes, cards, and liquor that were found in your belongings?"

"If they were found there, they were put there by somebody who wanted to do us harm."

"Most likely the same party who got Pepper to go to the boathouse with me," added Jack.

"Have you any idea who that party can be?"

"Yes, sir, but I should not like to speak of that," answered Jack. firmly.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

CAPTAIN PUTNAM looked at both cadets sharply.

"Both of you suspect somebody, is that it?" he said, slowly.

"We do," said Pepper.

"But you are not certain?"

"We are not certain, and therefore it would not be right for us to mention any names," said Jack.

"Now tell me the truth of your trouble with Mr. Crabtree," pursued the captain, after a thoughtful pause.

Thereupon, the two boys told how they had been taken from the cold storeroom and placed in the cellar, and how they had escaped through the clothing closet above. At the recital the captain had to turn away his face, to conceal a smile that hovered around his mouth.

"We didn't think it was fair at all," went on Jack. "So when we got out we determined to hide until you got back and then come to you. And that is just what we have done."

The captain was silent and nodded slowly to himself several times. Then he took a deep breath and rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Boys!" he exclaimed, decisively. "I am going to take you at your word. You can return to your studies and forget what has passed. Does that suit you?"

"It suits me!" exclaimed Jack, and his heart gave a bound.

"Suits me, too," added Pepper. "I am much obliged, sir."

"There is some mystery here, and some day perhaps we shall get at the bottom of it. I expect you to help me all you can to clear it up."

"Captain Putnam, am I to—re—to——"
Jack could not go on.

"To what, Ruddy?"

"Mr. Crabtree said I was to—er—to give up being major of the battalion——"

"You will take your place as formerly, Major Ruddy."

"Oh, thank you!" And now the youthful major's face fairly beamed.

"I will attend to this matter so far as it concerns Mr. Crabtree," went on the master of the Hall. "You may go."

"Thank you!" cried both cadets, and ran off with hearts as light as air.

"Hullo, glad to see you back!" whispered Andy, as they took their seats. "How did you get out of it?"

"I'll tell you after school," said Jack, and Pepper said the same.

Josiah Crabtree tried to question them, but they referred the assistant teacher to Captain Putnam. Later in the day the master of the Hall and Crabtree had a long session together, but what was said none of the students ever learned. But after that Josiah Crabtree was decidedly meek for a long while to come.

"I think he got a calling-down," said Pepper, to Jack.

"Well, don't you think he deserved it?" returned the young major.

After this affair Dan Baxter and his cronies were more bitter than ever against Pepper, Jack, and the others. Of course the plot to injure the boys had been gotten up by the bully, to pay them back for spoiling the proposed feast.

"Crabtree must have made a mess of it," growled Dan Baxter.

"That's it," answered Reff Ritter. "Well, we'll have to try something else."

"Right you are," answered the bully. "And next time we'll make a sure thing of it."

Several weeks passed along rather quietly.

During that time the weather changed rapidly. The rain had washed away the snow and most of the ice, and now the grass began to grow green and the trees pushed forth their leaves and the bushes their buds.

"I am glad spring and summer are coming," cried Andy. "I've had enough of winter."

"Right you are," said Pepper. "Hurrah for baseball!"

"And rowing," put in Dale.

Nearly all of the boys loved to row, and at the earliest opportunity the boats at the new boat-house were repaired and gotten out. At first the lads were a bit stiff at the oars, but soon limbered up.

"This is something like," said Andy, while he and some of the others were out in two of the boats.

"Let us have a little race," suggested Jack, and off the two boats started, up the lake a distance of half a mile. They kept side by side, and presently the race was declared a tie, and then the rowers stopped to rest.

"I've got news," said Dale. "Some of the students from Pornell Academy want to row us a race."

"Didn't they get enough last summer?" asked Andy.

"This is something of a new crowd," went on Dale. "Do you remember Roy Bock, and Grimes, and Gussic?"

"Do we?" cried Pepper. "The chaps who stopped us in the woods one night and wanted us to promise that we would not visit the Fords again. I rather guess we do!"

"What a bully that Roy Bock was!" put in Jack. "Almost as bad as Baxter."

"That's so," said Stuffer. "And that chap Grimes is about his equal. The Pornell students must be sick of that crowd."

"Some of the Pornell students are nice enough," was Dale's comment.

"So they are!" said Emerald. "So they are! But not Bock—no, not Bock!"

"Well, what about this race, Dale?" questioned Jack.

"Roy Bock, Grimes, Gussic, and four others of their crowd want to race a crew of seven, composed of you, Pepper, Andy, Emerald, Stuffer, Henry Lee, and myself, and they want to race us for two miles."

"When do they want to race?" asked Pepper, with interest.

"Next Saturday afternoon."

"Humph; that's rather short notice," was Andy's comment. "For all we know they may

have been practicing on the rowing-machine in their gym."

"Better put it off until the following Saturday," said Jack.

"No, Bock says he can't put it off, because they have got to row elsewhere."

"Do they want to put up any prize?"

"Yes, a silver cup worth fourteen dollars, each fellow to chip in a dollar for the trophy."

"Well, that is fair enough," said Hogan. "But if they have been after practicin' on their rowin' machine——"

"Never mind, let us row them anyway!" cried Pepper. "If we refuse they'll think we are afraid."

"I don't think we'll lose," said Jack. "That is, not if we practice hard between now and racing time."

"We can do that," said Stuffer, with determination.

"We'll put you on a diet, Stuffer," said Pepper, with a wink at the others.

"All right—anything to wir," said the boy who loved good eating. "I am glad it is only four days off instead of three weeks!"

That night a letter was sent accepting the challenge from the Pornell Academy students, and on the following day the Putnam Hall cadets

started to practice in earnest. Dale was made the coxswain, and he coached those under him to the best of his ability.

It soon became noised about that our friends were going to row a race against Roy Bock and his crowd, and at once nearly all of the cadets of the Hall became interested. As a consequence some other races were arranged, one between Baxter, Ritter, Coulter, and Paxton on one side and four boys from the rival school. The bully and his friends went around everywhere declaring that they would surely win.

"But Dale Blackmore and his crowd will lose, mark my words," said Dan Baxter.

"I don't think so," answered Henry Lee, who chanced to hear the remark.

"Well, you will, I'll bet on it."

"Thank you, but I don't bet," said Henry, quietly.

"That's because you are afraid," sneered the bully, and walked off.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BOAT RACES

THE day for the boat races dawned clear and bright. There was no breeze and the surface of Cayuga Lake was almost as smooth as a mill pond.

"What an ideal day for the contests!" cried Jack, as he and Andy walked down to the boat-house. "It couldn't possibly be better."

"If it doesn't blow up a storm by afternoon," answered the acrobatic cadet.

The boys went rowing for an hour in the morning, and Dale coached them as before. George Strong came down to watch them and gave them a few "points," for he had rowed in the crew of his college years before.

"You have not had quite enough practice," said the teacher. "But you do fairly well."

When the time came for the races quite a crowd assembled along the lake shore, and many were out in rowboats and sailboats and also in gasoline launches.

"I wonder if Mr. Ford is out?" said Jack. He referred to a wealthy gentleman of that district who owned a beautiful yacht. The season before Jack, Pepper, and Andy had saved Mr. Ford's two daughters, Laura and Flossie, from being drowned, and the gentleman had been their warm friend ever since.

"I think not," said Stuffer. "Their mansion at the Point has been closed up for the winter, and they are not yet back."

It was not long before Roy Bock and his crew appeared, in a brand-new rowboat which was certainly a beauty. It was painted black, with a gold stripe, and cut the water like a thing of life.

"That's a better boat than ours," whispered Stuffer. "No wonder they want to race us. I guess they want to show off their new boat as much as anything."

The Pornell students had brought with them a large number of "rooters," and these cheered to the echo when their friends appeared.

"Hurrah for Pornell Academy!"

"Go in and win! You can do it easily!"

"Hurrah for Putnam Hall!" cried the others, and this cheer also went the length of the course.

A race between four small boys was the first on the programme of events, and this was won by

Pornell by three lengths. When the result was announced the Pornellites cheered lustily.

"What did we tell you!"

"Now go in and win the next race!"

The next contest was that between some students of Pornell and Dan Baxter and his cronies. Both crews got away in good shape, and soon the bully's crew took the lead.

"Baxter's crew is going to win!"

"Wait, the race isn't finished yet!"

Half the race had been rowed, and still the Baxter crew kept the lead.

"Looks as if they might win after all," said Pepper.

"Well, I hope they do—for the honor of Putnam Hall," put in Jack, promptly.

"That's right—Putnam Hall against all comers!" cried Andy.

The race was almost done and Baxter's crew still had a lead of two lengths. They were rowing with all their might, but their strength was almost gone.

"Pull, fellows!" cried the leader of the opponents. And pull they did until the two boats were bow to bow.

"It's a tie!"

"No, the Pornell crew is ahead!"

"There they go over the line!"

"Pornell wins by a full length!"

The last cry was correct, and once again the Pornell followers yelled and cheered at the top of their lungs. Dan Baxter's crew was much crestfallen and rowed to the Putnam Hall boat-house looking glum enough.

"Now here come some more victims!" cried a Pornell enthusiast, as Dale and his crew appeared.

"Boys, we must win!" whispered Dale, with fire in his eyes. "We have simply got to do it. If we don't those Pornell fellows will never get done crowing over us."

"We'll win!" said Pepper, firmly. "Oh, we've got to do it! Row for all you are worth!"

The two boats were soon at the starting-point, and the rules of the race were explained.

"Are you ready?" was the question put.

There was a moment of silence.

Crack! went a pistol, and as the thin smoke floated over the lake the two crews took the water with their blades and were off.

Each crew rowed a swift, clear stroke, and for the first half-mile the two boats kept side by side.

"Looks like a tie!"

"No! the Pornell boat is crawling ahead!"

"This is Pornell's race too! Boys, this is our winning day!"

"Don't crow so soon," said Joe Nelson.

"Oh, Pornell is going to win," growled Reff Ritter. "Jack Ruddy and those chaps can't row."

"They can row better than you can," put in Bart Conners.

"Bah!" grumbled Ritter, and walked to another point of the boathouse float.

At the end of the first mile Pornell was slightly in advance. Seeing this, Dale increased the stroke, and at a mile and a quarter the boats were once again side by side.

"Putnam Hall is crawling up!"

"They'll win out yet!"

"Pull, Pornell, pull!" was the yell from the rival academy lads, and the Pornell boys did pull, the perspiration streaming down the faces of Roy Bock and his cronies.

"Gosh! this is a pace!" panted Andy.

"Don't talk!" came shortly from Dale. "Pull!"

Again he increased the stroke and Pornell did the same. A quarter of a mile was covered and Pornell was exactly half a boat's length in the lead.

"It's Pornell's race!"

"Hurrah for Roy Bock and his crew!"

"This is a great day for Pornell Academy!"

"Go home, Putnam, and learn how to row!"

The cries continued as the Pornell boat con-

tinued to forge ahead until it was nearly two lengths in advance. But the pace was beginning to tell on the rowers, and the fellow named Grimes was breathing with difficulty.

"Keep it up—don't give in yet!" cried Roy Bock. "We're almost done! Pull!"

Grimes tried to do so, and so did another fellow named Passmore. But they were "all in," as it is called, and could not add an ounce of strength to their stroke. Roy Bock was also almost gone, and for the instant the stroke was broken.

It was a chance that Dale had been looking for, and he was quick to take advantage of it. He called on his crew in a sharp way that caused them to brace up, and the stroke was increased wonderfully. Up crawled the Putnam Hall crew, until the other boat was but a quarter of a length ahead.

"Now, boys, now, and the race is ours!" sang out Dale, and they gave a spurt. The line was about a hundred and fifty feet away, and over this they shot—the winners by a length and an eighth!

CHAPTER XV

TARGET PRACTICE

"HURRAH! Putnam Hall wins the race!"

"That was a dandy, wasn't it?"

"Our boys rowed for all they were worth!"

Yells and cheers rent the air and there was a tooting of horns and whistles.

It was certainly a great victory for Putnam Hall, and Captain Putnam and George Strong were correspondingly proud. As usual Josiah Crabtree kept in the background, for he thought all such contests foolish.

"I congratulate you," the captain said to Dale and the others. "You deserve a great deal of credit."

"You won because you kept at it to the end," said George Strong.

Dan Baxter and his cronies were not happy. The victory of our friends seemed to make their defeat worse.

"I suppose they'll crow over us for keeps now," said Coulter.

"Oh, these races don't amount to much anyway," put in Reff Ritter, with a yawn.

"If they crow over me I'll shut 'em up," said Dan Baxter, savagely.

That evening the cadets of Putnam Hall held a celebration on the campus, and Jack, Pepper, and their chums were in high spirits. Baxter and his crowd did not show themselves.

"Poor Baxter!" said Andy. "He must feel sore all over—after the way he blowed."

"Maybe it will teach him a lesson not to do so much blowing in the future," came from Stuffer.

A campus fire had been lit, and around this the boys danced and sang songs. The barrels were piled high, so that the illumination could be seen a long distance.

"I wish the Fords had been here to see the race," said Pepper.

"And our folks," returned Jack. "We'll have to send a full account in the next letters we write."

"Harry Blossom took some photos," said Stuffer. "He said he would let us each have one."

"Good for the first lieutenant of Company A!" cried Jack.

"Hullo, here comes Peleg Snuggers!" cried Andy. "Now for some fun."

The cue was quickly taken up by the others, and in a trice the general-utility man was surrounded.

"Come, Peleg, we want you to make a speech!" cried Pepper.

"Don't know nuthin' about makin' speeches," grumbled the man.

"Oh, yes, you do," put in Andy. "Come now, that's a good man. Get upon the box!"

"Put him on this barrel!" said Stuffer, with a wink at his friends.

In a twinkling Peleg Snuggers was lifted up.

"Hi! hi! let me go!" he roared. "I don't want to stand on no barrel."

"It will be good for your health, Peleg," said another cadet.

"Up he goes!"

The general-utility man was placed on the barrel, which stood on a box. The outfit was a decidedly shaky one, and poor Peleg trembled from head to foot.

"I'm a-goin' over!" he groaned. "I know I'm a-goin' over!"

"Steady, old boy!" sang out a cadet. "Think you're in a circus, doing the great balancing act?"

"I ain't no circus actur, I ain't!"

"Now for the speech," said Pepper. "I'll begin it for you. Friends, debtors, and fellow-countrymen: On this sad and joyous occasion, it makes

us smile in tears to see so many ugly but handsome faces looking towards and away from us. There you are. Now go ahead, proceed, start, and begin."

"I can't make no speech, I tell you!" roared the general-utility man.

"Oh, Peleg, you make me cry!" said Andy. "Please go on, that's a dear good fellow!"

"Go ahead and we'll present you with a bunch of rhubarb blossoms," said Stuffer.

"An' measure yer head fer a golden crown, so we will!" added Emerald.

"If he can't talk we'll have to warm him up!" said another student, and waved a torch towards Snuggers.

This was a signal for all the boys to get torches, and soon they formed a circle around the barrel, each with a torch extended towards poor Peleg.

"Don't you burn me!" shrieked the unfortunate utility man.

"Speech! speech!" was the cry, and the boys came a little closer with their torches.

"I don't know what to say!"

"Speech! speech!" And the boys came still closer.

"I can't—oh, gracious! Don't burn me, I tell you! Keep back!" The sweat was pouring from the man's face. "I can't—— Well, here goes!

This here school is the best in the world. You fellers is the best in—keep back with that torch! You fellers is the worst—I mean the best in the world. I'm glad to serve you, but I'd be gladder if you'd leave me—get back, I say! It's been a juberous day, and we are all—we—are all——”

“Overflowing with joy,” suggested Jack.

“I ain't overflowing with joy—oh, get back! Yes, I am, and this glorious school—— Oh!”

The speech came to a sudden end, as the top of the barrel gave a crack. Down went the general-utility man into the barrel, which rolled from the box to the ground.

“Hullo!” cried Pepper. “Peleg wants a roll! Let's give it to him.”

“I don't want——” began the poor man, but could say no more. Over and over went the barrel, around the campus, with Snuggers in it, the cadets shrieking wildly with joy. Then down the hill to the rear it went.

“It's going into the lake!”

“Can he swim?”

“I don't think he can!”

“I ain't goin' into the lake!” screamed Peleg Snuggers, and clutched at some tufts of grass as he passed. This served to turn the barrel in a different direction, and it brought up against a tree with a bang. Then the general-utility man

crawled out and ran for the barn. He did not show himself again for the balance of that evening.

The fun was carried into the school, and late that evening there were several pillow-fights which George Strong and Josiah Crabtree had to stop. In the mix-up one of the pillows burst open, and Crabtree got all the feathers over his head and had to beat a retreat. But by midnight the fun came to an end and the school became as quiet as usual.

During the following week the boys had something to do which pleased the majority of them a great deal. For three afternoons of the week a part of each company went out for target practice. The targets were set up in a field some distance from the lake, where it would be perfectly safe to shoot at them. Each student was given five shots, and if he was a poor marksman Captain Putnam took it upon himself to teach the lad how to shoot better.

Jack, Andy, and Dale went out together, and the youthful major of the battalion was lucky enough to make forty-seven points out of a possible fifty.

"That is very good, Major Ruddy," said Captain Putnam. "I am glad to know that our major can shoot so well."

"Well, I suppose a commander ought to know something about it," answered Jack, modestly.

When it came Andy's turn to shoot, the acrobatic lad made forty-one out of a possible fifty. This was not so high, but as thirty-five was considered the passing mark there was no complaint.

"Well, I suppose it could be worse," was Andy's comment. He had been afraid that he would not pass, for he did very little shooting.

Reff Ritter was the next student up, and by luck more than anything else he made forty-three points.

"I learned to shoot in Paris," he said, loudly. "A French expert taught me."

"That was very good," said Captain Putnam, quietly.

Gus Coulter came next and at first failed to hit the target. His total was twenty-eight points.

"I shall have to give you a few lessons in shooting," said the master of the Hall.

"The—er—the wind was too strong," grumbled Coulter.

At that moment came a wild cry from one side of the field.

"Mad dog! Mad dog! Save me! Save me!"

CHAPTER XVI

ABOUT A MAD DOG

"WHERE is the mad dog?" cried Dan Baxter, in alarm.

"There he is!" shouted Gus Coulter, turning pale. "Oh, I do hope he doesn't come this way!"

All of the cadets and the others present looked in the direction from whence the cries proceeded. They saw a middle-aged woman running along a footpath to the side of the field. Behind her was a big dog, who was frothing at the mouth and snapping his teeth together viciously.

"Help me! Save me from the dog!" cried the woman. She was evidently some farmer's wife who lived in the neighborhood. She had been carrying a basket, but had thrown the article at the dog, in a weak effort to stay his progress.

When the alarm came Jack had one of the rifles in his hand. It was loaded, and now he turned quickly with the weapon.

"Take care! Don't hit the woman!" began Captain Putnam, when the crack of the weapon

cut short his warning. Taking hasty aim, the young major had fired at the mad animal. A yelp followed, the dog leaped high in the air, and then came down and lay still.

"Good! Jack nailed him!" shouted Andy. "A fine shot!"

"Let me see if he is dead," said Captain Putnam, and catching up another rifle he ran forward, followed by half a dozen cadets. Soon they reached the woman, who was on the point of fainting from fright and from running.

"Is he—he—dead?" she faltered.

"Yes, he is dead," announced the master of the Hall, making a close examination. "The bullet must have gone straight through his brain."

"He was mad, wasn't he?" went on the woman, recovering a bit.

"Beyond a doubt, and very violent, too."

"He scared me nearly to death. When I first saw him he was tangled up in some old fence-wire. It seemed to have set him crazy. I tried to get away from him, but as soon as he got shut of the wire he came after me."

"It was lucky that this young man shot him," said the captain, and pointed at Jack.

"Oh, did he do it?" cried the woman. "I thought you did it." She turned to the young major. "I am very much obliged, I am sure."

"And you are welcome," said Jack, blushing like a girl.

"Whose dog is it?" asked Andy.

"It belongs to Mr. Haverick, the horse-dealer. I suppose it was quite valuable."

"Let me see—are you not Mrs. Bennington?"

"I am. My husband sold you some wood last winter."

"Yes, I remember. Well, Mrs. Bennington, I do not know what to do with the dog excepting to have my man bury him."

"I think we had better let Mr. Haverick see him first. He thought a good deal of the animal. I'll have my husband tell him."

"Very well, we'll leave him where he is then—at least for the present."

The woman went on her way slowly, and the target practice was resumed. It soon became noised around what Jack had done, and many, including Pepper and Dale, came out to see the slain animal.

"That was all right, Jack!" cried Pepper. "That's better than hitting the target."

"I've been thinking of something," said Jack, in a serious tone. "Don't you remember that horse-dealer we once met on the boat, down at Cedarville?"

"Is that the same chap?"

"I think so. He was very overbearing, and I am afraid he will try to make trouble."

"Humph! He ought to be very glad that his dog didn't bite somebody," answered the Imp.

Dan Baxter had been much disturbed by the appearance of the mad dog, and his nerves were not yet settled. Consequently, when he came up to shoot he only made thirty-three out of a possible fifty points.

"This rifle is no good!" he growled. "It doesn't shoot straight."

"It is the rifle I used," said a student who had made forty-six points.

"And I used it too," said another, who had made forty-two points.

"I don't care, it doesn't shoot straight," growled the bully.

"You do not hold the rifle just right, Baxter," said Captain Putnam. "Take it this way," and he illustrated what he was saying.

Jack was right when he said the horse-dealer, Haverick, would try to make trouble. Early the following morning the man called at the Hall and demanded to see Captain Putnam.

"I understand one of your scholars shot my dog," said Sam Haverick. His face wore a deep scowl.

"You are Mr. Haverick, the horse-dealer?" questioned the captain, politely.

"I am."

"Yes, the dog was shot because he was mad and wanted to bite Mrs. Bennington."

"He wasn't mad at all! He was playful, that's all. That dog cost me fifty dollars. Somebody has got to pay for him."

"I don't think I shall pay for him," said the captain, stiffly. "He was mad beyond a doubt, and had to be shot. Had he bitten Mrs. Bennington it might have made a lot of trouble for you."

"Bah! I say he wasn't mad. I want pay for the dog."

"You'll not get it from me."

"Then I'll sue!"

"That is your privilege," answered Captain Putnam, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "But I don't think you'll gain anything by it."

"And I'll have the boy who shot the dog arrested," went on Sam Haverick, roughly.

The man's manner made the captain angry, and he stiffened up.

"If you do that, sir, I'll have you arrested also," he said.

"Me?"

"Yes,—for allowing a mad dog at large."

The captain's manner did not suit the horse-

dealer. He saw that he could not bulldoze the master of the Hall, and his manner changed.

"Then you ain't going to pay no damages?"

"Not a cent. I do not think you are entitled to anything. If I thought you were I'd settle in a minute."

"We'll see! We'll see!" grumbled Haverick, and stalked out of the building much discomfited.

As soon as the horse-dealer was gone, Captain Putnam called Jack into his private office and related what had occurred.

"Do not be alarmed, in case he tries to do anything," said the captain. "I will protect you."

"Can he do anything?"

"He can make us a little trouble, that is all. He is a foolish man."

The horse-dealer consulted a lawyer. But the legal light gave him small hope, and he finally concluded that he would not bring suit nor would he have Jack arrested. But he was very bitter, and vowed that sooner or later he would "make Captain Putnam smart, and that young cub of a shooter, too!"

On the following Saturday Jack, Pepper, and Dale went on a long tramp over the hills with George Strong. The teacher was looking for certain botanical specimens, and the boys assisted him all they could. The lads were glad to go

out with the second assistant teacher, for his talks were always of interest and profit. By going with him they learned more of botany and geology than they did from their schoolbooks.

"By the way, Mr. Strong," said Jack, as they were coming home, "have you learned anything more concerning that hidden pot of gold that your ancestors buried during the Revolutionary War?"

"Not a great deal, Ruddy. I have gained what looks like a clew to me. That is, that the pot of gold was buried in the hills some distance to the south of this spot."

"But you have no idea of the exact location?" said Pepper.

"I have not. If I had I'd certainly go and dig for it." And George Strong gave a short laugh.

"When you get time you ought to organize a regular treasure hunt," put in Dale.

"I've been thinking of that. But I do not like to waste time on a wild-goose chase," answered the teacher.

"What has become of those crazy men, Bart Callax and Paul Shaff?"

"I believe they are still out west, under the care of a distant relative."

"I suppose you don't want to meet them again," said Jack.

"No, never!" said George Strong, with a

shiver. He had not yet forgotten his terrible experience with his insane relatives.

The party of four had made a long detour and were returning to the Hall by a route that was somewhat new to them. They had a large hill to cross, the other side of which was filled with thick trees growing among some large rocks.

"This is wild enough for anything," said Pepper. "I didn't know there was any ground around here so rough."

"Be careful that you don't sprain an ankle," cautioned the teacher.

"Hullo, what's this?" cried Dale, coming to a sudden halt.

"A cave!" ejaculated Pepper. "A regular cave," he added, peering into the opening.

"Let's explore it," said Jack. "We've got time enough."

George Strong was willing, and a minute later the exploration of the cave began.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE CAVE

THE cave was an irregular one of uncertain depth. The opening lay under a big, jagged rock, with other rocks on either side. One after another they passed into the underground chamber without much trouble.

"It's rather dark," said Jack. "Hadn't we better light a torch?"

"By all means," said the teacher, and went out and got a pine branch. This burnt very well, although it made quite some smoke. They advanced with caution, for the cave was not very high and nobody wanted to strike his head on the sharp rocks above. In some places the tree-roots hung down like so many snakes.

"By the way, I wonder if there are any snakes in here?" observed Dale, when from under a rock glided a reptile about two feet long, followed by another a trifle smaller. Dale let out a yell and retreated, and so did the other boys.

"They are harmless," called out George Strong.

"They are common wood-snakes. See, they have crawled out of sight already. They are more scared than you are."

"I must say I hate snakes," said Jack. "I am willing to leave them alone if only they will leave me alone."

"The trouble is, most folks know very little about snakes," said the teacher. "Why, a snake can be made a great pet, just like a cat or a dog, or a bird. Many snake-charmers really make pets of their snakes."

"Excuse me, I'd rather have a dog or a bird any day," said Dale.

"Or even an old tomcat," put in Pepper.

The cave was not very wide, indeed it seemed to be merely a split in the rocks and dirt. In one spot the tree-roots were so thick the party had to literally force its way along.

"Be careful," came in a warning from George Strong. "Don't get stuck so tight that you can't get out again."

"I'll look out for that," said Pepper who was in advance.

Presently they reached a spot where the cave divided into three parts. At the bottom of one part flowed a spring of clear, cold water.

"This is fine!" declared Dale, after taking a drink.

"Look out that you don't swallow a lizard," said Jack.

"I can tell you what," declared Pepper, gazing around by the light of the smoky torch, "this would make quite a retreat if it was cleaned out."

At last they could go no further and began to retrace their steps. At one point they had to crawl over some rocks and under some tree-roots.

"Wonder if I can push the tree up?" cried Dale, by way of a joke, and pressed upward with his back.

"Take care!" cried George Strong. "You may loosen something and get hurt."

"The rock is shifting!" yelled Jack. "Look out!"

There was a grinding, and all saw that a rock above them was settling down. The teacher, Jack, and Pepper ran in one direction and Dale in another.

An awful noise followed, and the loose dirt flew in all directions. For a minute all were greatly confused.

"Are you boys hurt?" was the first question asked by the assistant teacher.

"I'm all right," said Pepper.

"So am I," added Jack.

"Where is Dale?"

"He slipped back, the way he had come."

"Dale! Dale!" shouted the teacher. No answer came back to the summons.

"Perhaps he was killed!" gasped Pepper.

"Oh, don't say that," came from Jack. "Dale! Dale!" he went on loudly.

Still there was no answer, and now all became thoroughly alarmed. George Strong moved over to the rock that had fallen and examined it with care.

"I don't believe he is under this," he said. "But he may be caught in some way on the other side."

"How are we to get at him?" was the question from Pepper.

The torch was dying down and Jack had to work his way out of the cave and find a new pine bough for a light.

"Maybe we can get at him from the top," suggested Jack. "There seemed to be quite a cave-in there."

"I will look," said the teacher.

All hurried outside and to the spot the young major had noticed. The ground was much sunken.

"He is literally buried alive!" cried George Strong. "We must dig him out, and be quick about it!"

They went at the stones and dirt with vigor, yet

taking care that no additional cave-in should result. All they had to work with was a trowel George Strong had brought along and their hands, but despite this drawback they made fair progress.

"I see a hole!" cried Jack, after five minutes of hard work.

"Be careful!" cautioned George Strong again. "Call down to Dale."

The young major did so, but still there was no answer. The hole was increased in size until it was big enough to admit the passage of a human form. Then the torch was flared below.

"I see him!" said Jack. "He is flat on his back."

"Does he seem to be caught by the rocks?"

"No."

The teacher took a look and then ordered that the hole be made a little larger.

"I will lower myself to him," said George Strong. "Then I will pass him up to you."

He disappeared into the hole and took the torch with him. Presently he called out, and then they saw him lifting up Dale's limp form. They caught hold of their chum's body and drew it to a place of safety.

"He seems to be knocked unconscious," said Jack, soberly.

They assisted the teacher to the surface above the cave, and then all three turned their attention to Dale. There was a lump on the unconscious boy's head and a scratch on his chin.

"Get some water and we'll bathe him," said George Strong, and this was done, and presently Dale opened his eyes.

"Take it away!" he murmured. "It's too heavy for me!"

"You're all right, Dale," said Jack. "You're safe." And then Dale stared around him.

"Wha—what did you say?" he stammered. "Oh, my head!" And he put up his hand.

"You are safe," said the teacher.

"Didn't that rock come down on me?"

"It came pretty close to you. It must have grazed your head, and that is what made you unconscious."

"And how—how did I get here?"

"We dug you out," said Pepper.

"Oh!" And for the time being the suffering youth said no more.

They continued to bathe his face and wrists, and presently he said he felt better. But George Strong made him wait half an hour before standing on his feet.

"I'm a bit dizzy and light-headed, but that's all," declared Dale, when they finally set out for

Putnam Hall. "Say, I reckon I had a narrow escape, didn't I?"

"You did," answered the teacher.

"Weren't you caught at all?"

"No."

"That's what I get for trying to lift up a tree," pursued Dale, with a sorry little grin. "No more such foolishness for me!"

They took their time about getting back, and it was long after the supper hour when the academy was reached. George Strong explained matters to Captain Putnam and they had the meal in private.

"That was certainly quite an adventure," remarked Jack.

"Yes, and one I shouldn't wish to experience again," answered Dale. "I shan't go into another cave in a hurry, take my word on that!"

"I wonder if the cave was ever used for anything?" asked Pepper.

"I do not think so," returned George Strong. "It was merely a split in the rocks, probably caused by a landslide."

CHAPTER XVIII

SEEN THROUGH A SPYGLASS

THREE days later Jack came to Pepper, Andy, and Dale, who were out on the campus catching ball.

"Mr. Strong is in trouble," he announced, and the ball catching came to an end at once.

"What's up, Jack?"

"Somebody I think has been playing tricks on him."

"What did they do?"

"Order a lot of things in his name."

"I must say I don't understand," said Andy, with a puzzled look.

"Day before yesterday there came an elegant set of Cooper's works by express with a C. O. D. charge of thirty-two dollars. Mr. Strong never ordered the books."

"That's mean, to play a trick like that on him," said Dale. "Now if it was old Crabtree I wouldn't say a word."

"Yesterday came a bookcase, also C. O. D., at

eighteen dollars, and then he got three fountain pens by mail, with a bill for twelve dollars."

"Has he any idea who ordered the things?" asked Andy.

"Not the slightest idea in the world."

"He must be mad."

"He said he was very much annoyed and could not imagine who would be mean enough to play such tricks on him."

"If they signed his name to the orders that would be forgery," was Dale's comment.

"So it would."

"Why doesn't he send for the orders?"

"He is going to do it."

The second assistant teacher was indeed in trouble. On the day following the above conversation a parrot arrived in a cage for him, followed by a canary bird. Then came a canoe and a rifle, both sent "on approval." The next day he got a letter from a city firm, asking how he wished them to send the automobile that he desired.

"This is too much!" said the teacher, as he read the letter to Captain Putnam.

"It is an outrage," answered the master of the Hall, warmly. "We must find out who is up to these tricks."

"It will keep me busy a long time explaining

matters," went on George Strong, with a troubled look on his face.

"You had better refuse all goods after this, unless you are certain they are all right."

"I'll do it."

The next day seemed to cap the climax, for that morning there came a crate of dishes, two boxes of mineral water of the most expensive kind, and a folding baby carriage. George Strong was desperate and refused to accept anything, despite the protestation of the express driver from Cedarville.

"I didn't order the things and I won't accept them!" cried the teacher. "Send them back!"

"And about the charges?" asked the expressman.

"Collect at the other end. I have nothing whatever to do with the orders." And the expressman went away grumbling loudly to himself.

As was to be expected, the refusal to accept goods brought a great deal of trouble. George Strong received some harsh letters and in some cases was threatened with suits-at-law. In three instances he received the original orders for inspection, but they were poorly written, in pencil, and he could make little or nothing out of them. Goods had been sent to him because he referred

to Captain Putnam as to his responsibility to make payments. This brought the master of the Hall into the mix-up, and he had to do what he could to explain matters.

"We must certainly locate the party or parties who are guilty," said the captain. "Mr. Strong, have you any especial enemies among the students?"

"I think not, captain."

"Have you had occasion to reprimand any of them, or keep them in after regular hours?"

"Oh, yes, I have kept some of them in."

"Who?"

The teacher named over seven or eight, among them being Reff Ritter, Dan Baxter, and Gus Coulter.

"Any others?"

"I once had to keep in Dale Blackmore and Andy Snow for talking together. But I do not think they can be guilty."

"Perhaps not, although Snow is rather full of fun."

The matter was talked over and the teacher said he would watch the boys he had mentioned closely.

On the following Saturday Jack and Andy got permission to go to Top Rock Hill, located not many miles from the academy. They wanted

some of the others to go along, but there was a "scrub" baseball game on and they declined.

"Do you remember how Baxter got into trouble at Top Rock Hill last fall?" said Jack, as they trudged along.

"Indeed I do, Jack," returned Andy. "I don't think he'll try to take any more nuts from private property."

Jack had with him a new spyglass and wanted to test it. The boys climbed to the very top of the hill, where a grand panorama was spread before them. On one side were the rolling hills and on the other the slope running down to the lake, which lay glistening like silver in its rim of green.

"I can see the Hall with this glass," said Jack. "And I can see some of the fellows out on the lake in boats."

He allowed Andy to take a look, and after a while they turned the glass in the direction of the somewhat dusty road that wound around the foot of Top Rock Hill.

"I can see a buggy coming along the road," said Jack. "There is a man in it."

Andy took a look at the turnout.

"Why, that is one of our horses!" he exclaimed. "The spotted white, Billy Boy. Can it be the captain who is out driving?"

"No, he was in his office when we came away."

"Maybe it is old Crabtree."

"I think it is Mr. Strong by his hat," said Jack, handling the glass. "I can't see his face very clearly. He is slowing up and—— Well, I declare!"

Jack stopped suddenly and gave another long look.

"See! see!" he exclaimed. "Two men are on the road. What are they doing?"

"They seem to be quarreling with the carriage driver," answered Andy. "They are hauling him out of the carriage, and, yes, it is Mr. Strong!"

"If he is in trouble, we ought to help him!"

"Right you are! Come on!"

Shutting up the spyglass, the two cadets hurried from the top of the hill in the direction of the wagon-road. The way was rough and uncertain and they had to beware of dangerous holes. Once they got caught in a tangle of bushes and had to go back.

"I hope we are not losing the right direction," panted Andy, as he paused to gaze round.

"We are all right," answered the young major. "Hurry up! He may be in peril of his life!"

At last they gained the bottom of the rocky hill. There was a small meadow to cross, beyond which was the wagon-road, lined with trees and bushes.

"Help!" they heard somebody cry. "Help! help!"

"That is Mr. Strong's voice!" exclaimed Andy.

"I see the horse and carriage!" answered Jack, pointing down the road. "Look, the carriage is empty!"

"And the horse is running away!" finished his chum, as they saw the steed dash onward at a gallop.

"Help! help!" came the cry again. Both boys looked around, but could see no one.

"Shall we call to him?" asked Andy.

"No! no!" answered Jack, hastily. "That will put his assailants on guard. Come, the cry came from yonder."

Forward the two boys darted once more, and then Andy called a halt.

"We haven't anything in the way of weapons," said he. "Let us get clubs."

This advice was followed promptly. Fortunately heavy sticks were readily to be had, so but little time was lost. Then, as they heard another cry, they darted into a thicket along the roadside.

A moment later they came upon a thrilling scene. George Strong was in the grasp of one man, who held him from the back, while a second man was going through his pockets.

CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER CHALLENGE

"I KNOW those fellows!" whispered Jack, as he and Andy came to a halt behind convenient trees.

"So do I. They are Mr. Strong's two crazy relatives, Bart Callax and Paul Shaff."

The cadets hardly knew what to do.

"I want that million dollars!" cried the man named Callax. "Give it to me!"

"And I want the order for an airship," put in Paul Shaff.

"Bart! Paul! Let me go!" said George Strong. "You are making a mistake, I tell you!"

"If you don't give us what we want we'll tie you to a tree and burn you up!" cried Shaff.

"They are certainly crazy," whispered Andy. "They ought to be in an asylum."

"I wonder how they got here?"

"Ran away from those other relatives in the west, I suppose," returned the young major, and

he spoke the exact truth. The relatives had been looking all over for the crazy men, but without success.

Suddenly the two crazy men threw George Strong flat on his back and began to beat him with their fists.

"Come, we must do what we can!" cried Jack, and ran forward.

The man named Callax was closest to him, and raising his stick he dealt the fellow a blow that caused him to fall dazed on the sward.

At the same time Andy hit Paul Shaff a glancing blow on the shoulder. The crazy man turned, leaped up, and caught the cadet by the throat.

"Le—let go of—of m—me!" gasped Andy.

"Boys! I am glad you came!" burst from George Strong's lips. He scrambled up and caught Shaff by the arm. "Let him go, do you hear, Paul! Let him go, I say!" And after an effort he managed to draw the crazy man back.

By this time Bart Callax was getting up. The blow Jack had dealt seemed to take much of the fight out of him.

"Do—don't hit me again!" he whined.

"Then leave Mr. Strong alone," answered the young major.

"I want my million dollars!"

"And I want my airship," put in Paul Shaff. "I have an order to go to the North Pole, to get fifty polar bears for the circus!"

"If you'll behave yourselves I'll see that you get what is coming to you," said George Strong. "But you mustn't attack me in this fashion."

"Too bad! We are so poor!" cried Callax, and suddenly began to weep. Then Shaff sat on the ground and looked the picture of despair.

"What do you want to do, Mr. Strong?" whispered Jack.

"Where is the horse and buggy?"

"The horse ran away, up the road, but maybe I can find him," answered Andy.

"Then do so, if you can. If it can be done, I wish to place these poor chaps where they can do no further harm."

"Better place them in a regular asylum after this," suggested Jack.

"No asylum for me!" yelled Bart Callax, leaping up. "Good-bye!" And he dove into the bushes.

"Stop him!" cried the teacher, but it was too late. In the excitement Paul Shaff also got away, and that was the last seen of the pair for some time to come.

In the meantime Andy had gone after the runaway horse. As he surmised, the steed had not

gone a great distance, and a third of a mile up the road was found in a hollow, quietly cropping the grass. Fortunately the buggy was not damaged in the least, and he had no difficulty in returning to the scene of the encounter with the turnout.

"They came upon me so suddenly that I was taken off my guard," said the second assistant teacher, when telling his story. "I tried to reason with them and said I would take them to the Hall, but they pulled me from the buggy and dragged me into the wood. They might have killed me if you had not happened along."

"I am glad to be of service to you," said Jack. "But if I were you I'd make a strong effort to catch them. They are too dangerous to be left at large."

"I'll put some officers of the law on their track," said the teacher, and this was, later on, done.

"Mr. Strong, perhaps this explains it!" cried Jack, as they were driving back to Putnam Hall.

"Explains what, Ruddy?"

"Those orders for goods sent out in your name. Those crazy men might do something like that?"

"That is so!" ejaculated the teacher. "It never struck me before. I must look into it without delay. No doubt they are guilty." And this proved to be the fact.

With the coming of warm weather the thoughts of many of the students had turned to baseball. Several teams had already been organized, including one by Reff Ritter. Baxter had wanted to organize a team, but Ritter got ahead of him. However, the bully of the Hall was made pitcher, with Ritter as catcher, so he was content. Coulter played first-base and Paxton short-stop. They called themselves the Medals, and issued a challenge to any team in the school.

"That means us," said Jack. "Baxter and Ritter are bound to get ahead of us if they possibly can."

Since the previous summer there had been some changes made among the boys when playing baseball, and now a team was made up with Bart Conners, the captain of Company A, as captain and short-stop. Jack was pitcher, Dale catcher, Andy first-base, Pepper second-base, Stuffer third-base, Hogan center-field, Harry Blossom right-field, and Henry Lee left-field. Dave Kearney and two others were substitutes. This team was called the Browns, for all of the players got suits of brown. The Ritter and Baxter crowd procured suits of blue, with red stockings.

After a good deal of talk it was decided that the Medals and the Browns should play a game

a week later, on a Saturday afternoon. Both teams at once began to practice vigorously.

"Baxter is taking private lessons from a professional pitcher who comes to Cedarville from Ithaca," said Pepper one day. "I got the word from Hampden, who saw him."

"Did Hampden say anything more?"

"He said Baxter was going to fool us on a new kind of a curved ball."

The news was true. From a friend in the city the bully had gotten the name and address of the professional pitcher, and the latter was now giving Baxter as many lessons as the cadet's spare time would allow.

The new curved ball was a difficult one to pitch, and had to be delivered by a certain swing of the wrist and the elbow. At first Baxter could not "get the hang" of it, as he said, but presently it came to him, and then he delivered the ball very well.

"That's the way to do it," said the professional pitcher. "Keep it up like that and you will fool 'em every inning."

"I hope I do," answered Dan Baxter. "I want to down that team sure."

"Well, you keep at it, and don't you fear for results."

To make sure that the professional was not

humbugging him, the bully pitched for his cronies in a field away from Putnam Hall. He struck out Coulter, Paxton, and Sabine in succession, and Ritter got nothing but an accidental pop fly.

"That is certainly a great ball to pitch," was Reff Ritter's comment. "I don't see how we can lose if you keep that up, Dan."

"I'll keep it up, don't worry about that," was the answer. "I'll beat them if it breaks my arm to do it."

Everybody in the school was interested in the coming game, and in private not a few wagers were made on the result. When the two teams went out to practice Dan Baxter did not pitch the new kind of curve, and many thought his work weak in consequence.

Jack pitched in the regular way, but as soon as he heard that Dan Baxter was taking lessons from a professional the young major went at pitching in earnest and perfected his signals for his catcher, Dale. Jack could pitch a fairly speedy ball and also a drop ball that he hoped would prove effective from time to time.

The day for the game dawned fairly clear. There were a few clouds in the sky and a breeze from off the lake. The game was to begin at three o'clock and before that time visitors began

to arrive from Cedarville and elsewhere, including some students from Pornell Academy.

"Hullo, here is a surprise!" cried Andy, pointing to a big automobile that was coming along the road. "Mr. Ford and his wife, and two daughters."

"How do you do!" cried Laura and Flossie, as the automobile drew closer. "Can we come in to see the game?"

"Certainly you can!" answered Jack, warmly, and took off his cap. "We are much pleased to see you."

"We missed the boat race, but we didn't wish to miss this—at least the girls didn't," said Rossmore Ford.

"We'll get you good seats," said Pepper.

"Thank you, but we can stay right in the automobile," said the wealthy gentleman.

"We expect you to win!" said Laura to Jack.

"You must win!" cried Flossie, to the others.

"We are going to try our best," answered Andy, and the others said practically the same. Then the boys ran off, for it was time to start the game.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE BALL-FIELD

REFF RITTER won the toss-up and sent the Browns to the bat. Pepper was the first batter up, and as he took his place at the plate a slight cheer went up.

"Play!" called the umpire, one of the teachers from another school.

Dan Baxter held the ball a second, looked at the plate, and let drive.

"Strike one!" sang out the umpire, although Pepper had not struck at the sphere.

Again the ball was delivered, and Pepper sent the bat around as quickly as he could.

"Strike two!"

Then came a ball,—just a little too high. Then the sphere was delivered once more.

"Strike three! Batter out!"

"Good for Baxter! That's the way to do it!"

"That ball shot up at the last instant," said Pepper to Jack.

"It must be the new curved ball," answered the young major.

Hogan was the next to the bat. The Irish lad was usually a fairly good batsman, and when he was struck out a cry of wonder went up.

"Baxter is certainly pitching to-day!"

"Here comes Snow! He'll hit it, I guess."

Andy had two strikes called on him and then knocked a little foul, right in the catcher's hands.

"Three out! That was pretty short."

"And no hit."

When Dan Baxter came up and took a seat on the bench a grin overspread his face.

"I guess you've got 'em going," said Coulter.

"Sure thing," answered the bully. "They won't know where they stand when I get through with them."

Coulter was the first player up for the Medals, and went out on a foul to third. Then came Paxton, who reached first on a drive to center. The next player followed with a fly to second. When the inning came to an end the Medals had one run.

"Hurrah for the Medals!" shouted some of the students.

"Now we must get on to that curved ball," said Jack, as Harry Blossom went to the plate.

But Harry could no more than knock a foul and then went out on three strikes.

"Now, Jack!" called out Bart. "See if you can't whack it out."

Jack grasped his bat firmly and looked at Baxter sharply. The bully's face wore a sickly grin. Jack had a strike called on him before he tried to hit the sphere. Then came another strike.

"Baxter is going to strike Ruddy out too!"

"No use of talking, Dan is a great pitcher this season."

Again the ball came in, but it was too low and the umpire called it a ball.

Then the sphere came in just right. Jack saw it curving and did not bring his bat around until the last instant. Then followed a bunt, and while Dan Baxter fumbled with the ball Jack got to first.

"Hullo, he got to first anyway!"

"Only on a bunt," came from a follower of the Medals.

The next player at the bat went out on strikes and the student to follow on a fly to third, and thus Jack, though he got to third, failed to score. Then the Baxter and Ritter team came in and made two runs.

"Look at that score! Browns 0, Medals 3!"

"This is certainly a winning day for the Medals!"

"That's what it is!"

The friends of the Browns said nothing, but looked decidedly glum. The next inning resulted in a goose-egg for each side. At the end of the fifth inning the score stood Browns 0, Medals 5.

"I want to tell you about that curved ball," said Andy. "I have been watching Baxter closely. When his arm goes like this, it's an in-shoot, when it goes like this it's an out-shoot, and when it is twisted up like this, it's a drop-ball. Now watch and see if I am not right."

"You are right," said Emerald. "I watched it meself, so I did."

"Well, let us see what good watching did," said Jack.

Hogan was at the bat, and the Irish lad got two balls and two strikes. Then came a drop-ball, but Emerald raised it up far into center-field.

"Good!" yelled Pepper. "Go, Emerald, go!" And go the Irish cadet did, and reached second-base before the fielder could send the ball up.

Hogan's two-base hit seemed to put new life in the Browns, and at the end of that inning they had two runs to their credit. More than that, they had hit the ball six times.

"I guess we have solved the mystery of Baxter's curves," said Bart to his team.

"Yes, but we are still behind," said Andy, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, don't give up yet."

"Give up? Not a bit of it!" cried the acrobatic youth.

At the end of the seventh inning the score stood Browns 3, Medals 6. Then came a long-drawn-out inning, leaving the score at the ending of the eighth Browns 6, Medals 9.

"This is our last chance," said Bart. "We must do our level best."

An out was made and then two players got their bases. Then came a ball which Bart himself lifted to right-field, close to the foul flag.

"Run! Run!" yelled the supporters of the Browns, and run they did, bringing in two runs and leaving Bart on third.

"That's the way to do it!"

"One more run and the score will be a tie!"

"That was a foul!" grumbled Reff Ritter.

"Of course it was a foul!" chimed in Dan Baxter.

"It was a fair ball," said the umpire. "Perfectly fair."

The Medals wanted to argue, but the umpire would not listen. There was a cry from all around the diamond to "Play ball!" and the umpire pulled out his watch.

"Play in two minutes or forfeit the game," he said, loudly.

Still grumbling, Dan Baxter walked back to the box. He sent in a ball with care and the batsman had a strike called on him. But then came a safe hit and Bart came in, tying the score, 9 to 9, amid a great cheering.

Pepper was now to the bat, but went out on a fly to second. Then came Hogan.

"Now, Emerald, we depend on you," said Bart, in a low tone.

"I shan't disappoint yez, not me!" grunted the Irish cadet. "I'm on to his curves, so I am!"

The very first ball came in just as Hogan wished it. He took a step, landed solidly on the sphere, and sprinted like mad for first.

"Foul ball!" sang out the umpire, when poor Emerald was halfway to second base.

"Bad cess to the foul!" panted the batsman, as he walked slowly back to the home-plate. "I thought I had third sure!"

The next ball was too high, and he let it pass. Then came another just right, and once more the Irish youth banged away with all of his might. this time the sphere went down to deep center.

"Run! run!" was the yell. "Run, Emerald!"

"Show 'em what an Irish lad can do!"

And Emerald did run, up to third. Then he saw the second-baseman muff the ball and saw Dan Baxter start for it, and he tore towards

home. Over the plate he slid—and the ball came in—but just a second too late.

“The Browns are one run ahead!”

“Andy Snow is up next.”

“He won’t do much.”

“Wait and see.”

Andy had a strike called on him and then got three balls. Evidently Dan Baxter was getting nervous.

“Take your time, Andy,” said Bart. Andy did take his time, and as a result got four balls and walked to first-base.

Harry Blossom followed and Andy got to third. Then came a short hit to first, and Andy came in. By this time the Browns were highly enthusiastic, while the Medals were correspondingly dejected. Dan Baxter “went to pieces” completely, and when the Browns finally went out it was with fourteen runs to their credit.

“Now we must pull up,” said Ritter, with a scowl at Dan Baxter.

“It’s a mountain to climb over,” grumbled Coulter.

Jack was on his mettle and did all he could to steady himself. The first player up to the bat was struck out, and the second went out on a foul. Then one got to first on balls and another followed.

"Steady, Jack, steady!" whispered Pepper.
"Don't go to pieces as Baxter did."

"I won't," said Jack, and shut his teeth hard.

With two out the Medals filled the bases, and then Reff Ritter came to the bat.

"Knock a homer, Reff!" shouted one of his friends. "A home run would mean four runs."

Reff scowled at Jack as he took his place. Jack looked determined. He threw in the ball with care.

"Strike one!"

"Too high!" grumbled Ritter.

Again the ball came in.

"Ball one!"

Once again the sphere was delivered, and Reff Ritter struck at it with all his might. It sailed over Jack's head and seemed bound for center-field, when like a flash Pepper at second leaped up and caught it in his left hand.

"Hurrah! What a fine catch!"

"That ends the game!"

"The Browns win! Hurrah!"

CHAPTER XXI

MARCHING TO CAMP

FOR the victory they had won our friends were warmly congratulated. Many came up and patted them on the back.

"It was a dandy catch, Pepper," said Joe Nelson. "I never saw a better."

"That was a fine rap of Emerald," said Pepper. "That set the ball a-rolling for us."

Dan Baxter felt thoroughly disgusted at the result and so did Reff Ritter and the others of the Medals.

"We might have won the game if you hadn't gone to pieces," grumbled Ritter to the bully.

"Huh!" answered Baxter. "I hadn't any support," and then he hurried for the Hall and out of sight.

"Baxter certainly pitched well for eight innings," said Jack. "One must give him credit."

As soon as they could get away from their friends, Jack and his chums walked over to where Mr. Ford had stationed his automobile.

"Oh, it was lovely!" cried Laura. "I never enjoyed a game more."

"I was so afraid you were going to lose at first I hardly knew what to do," came from Flossie. "The winning out was grand!"

"You must come over to the Lodge, now we are settled down for the summer," said Mrs. Ford, and the cadets promised to pay them a visit if they could manage to get off for that purpose.

"They are fine people," remarked Andy, as they watched the departure of the automobile. "And the girls are——"

"Peaches," finished Pepper, and then all of the boys laughed.

During the next two weeks came several more ball-matches. The Browns played with four other nines, winning two games and losing two. The Medals played six games, of which they won only two.

"Hurrah! I've got news for you fellows!" shouted Jack, as he burst into the gymnasium one afternoon after a long talk with Captain Putnam. "We are to go into camp for three days, starting the middle of next week."

"Good!" shouted Dale. "That suits me to a T!"

"Me too," put in Stuffer. "No more hard lessons in algebra, and language——"

"And plenty to eat, eh, Stuffer?" put in Pepper. "You got more than hardtack when we were out before, didn't you?"

"You just bet I did,—and I had a dandy time, too," answered Singleton.

"Where are we to go?" questioned Dale.

"That hasn't been decided on just yet. If he can arrange it, Captain Putnam is going to let us go to a spot called Bear Island."

"Great Cæsar, I don't want to hunt bears!" cried Harry Blossom.

"I don't think there are any bears on the island now, although there may have been years ago," answered the young major.

The news soon spread throughout the school that they were to go into camp, and all of the students were correspondingly happy and began to plan what they would do when on the pleasure trip. It may be explained here that Captain Putnam took the cadets out to camp several times a year, just to give them a taste of army life.

"There will be fun in camp," said Pepper.

"Right you are," answered Andy, with a wink that meant a great deal.

Andy and Dale were coming through the lower hall that afternoon when they ran into Mumps. The toady was almost as white as a sheet and trembling from head to foot.

"Oh! I—I'm so glad I've met somebody!" gasped Mumps.

"What's the matters, Mumps?" asked Dale.

"A—a burglar!"

"A burglar?" cried Andy, and now he was all attention.

"Yes, a real burglar. I—I just saw him!"

"Where?"

"Up in the dormitories. He was in Number 3, and then he went into Numbers 6 and 7. He—he was packing up all the—the things!" Mumps was shaking so he could scarcely speak.

"Why didn't you tell the captain?"

"I was going to, but—but I was afraid the burglar would—would——"

"Catch you?" asked Dale, and the toady nodded.

"We'll have to report this," said Andy. "Was there only one?"

"I—I—guess so, but I—I am not sure. Oh, isn't it awful!"

"Let us see for ourselves," said Dale. "I am not afraid of a burglar."

"Oh, he may shoot you!" gasped Mumps.

"I'll risk that. Come, show us where he is."

"That's the talk," broke in Andy. "We'll catch him red-handed and turn him over to the captain."

"I—I don't want to go back," pleaded the toady. "Bet—better call Captain Putnam."

"Not yet, Mumps. Where was the fellow last?"

"In dormitory Number 7."

"We'll soon root him out!" cried Dale, and leaped up the stairs with Andy at his heels. "Come on!" And Mumps followed, but at a safe distance behind.

Dale and Andy approached dormitory Number 7 with caution. It was empty and all of the rugs from the floor were gone.

A noise in the next room reached them. They looked in and saw a man kneeling on the floor, tying half a dozen small rugs into a bundle.

"Is this the man?" asked Andy, stepping back to Mumps.

"Ye—yes," stammered the toady. "Do—don't let him shoot you!"

"Mumps, you are the most cowardly fellow I ever saw in my life," went on the acrobatic youth.

"I don't care, some burglars are desperate characters," whined Mumps. "I've read of them shooting people who tried to catch 'em."

"This man isn't a burglar."

"How do you know?" and now the toady's eyes opened widely.

"He is the man the captain hired to clean all

the rugs and the carpets in the Hall. While we are in camp the school is to have a general cleaning "

"Well, I never!" murmured Mumps.

"You're a fine burglar hunter," said Dale, and began to laugh. "Mumps, you ought to become a detective."

"Oh, you needn't make fun of me," whined the toady, and ran off with a very red face.

The story was too good to keep, and soon many of the students knew how Baxter's toady had thought to trap a burglar, and Mumps was plagued unmercifully. The man to do the cleaning also heard of it and laughed as loudly as anybody.

On the following Wednesday morning bright and early the cadets left Putnam Hall for the brief encampment. They took with them three wagons, loaded with tents, cooking utensils, and provisions.

The battalion certainly presented a fine appearance when it started off. Every cadet was looking his best, in a well-brushed uniform with shining buttons. Each gun and sword was polished to perfection. Major Jack was at the head, and he was filled with pardonable pride when he gave the order to march.

Tap! tap! tap, tap, tap! went the drums, and

then the fifers struck up a shrill and lively air, and off they moved down the road in the direction of Lake Smalley, in the center of which was located Bear Island. The distance to be traveled was seventeen miles, and they calculated to cover it before sundown with ease.

The first few miles were over a smooth road, and good progress was made. Then they struck a hill, with rather a rough highway beyond, and the cadets were ordered to take the route step—that is, walk as you please. The way was past many farms and through some small communities, and many folks came out, to wave handkerchiefs and give them a cheer. One old lady who was on her front porch sweeping shook her broom at them, but did it so pleasantly the cadets had to laugh.

“Ye march well!” shouted one old farmer. “Good! Some day ye can all go to war, maybe, like I did years ago!” And he waved a red bandana at them.

At noon they stopped at a cross-roads hotel for dinner. Their coming had been arranged for by Captain Putnam, and they partook of a good meal of vegetables and rhubarb pie. A rest of an hour followed, and during that time some of the boys strolled to the cross-roads general store and made a few purchases.

By two o'clock the battalion was again on the march. They now passed through a patch of timber and then came to a turn in the road, beyond which were some fields of wheat and corn.

"Hullo, look there!" shouted one of the cadets, and pointed upward. All gazed in the direction and saw coming toward them a big balloon. It was settling rapidly, and before the cadets could get out of the way it came down directly over the **entire battalion.**

CHAPTER XXII

A NIGHT OF FUN

"HULLO, what's this?"

"Well, I never saw such a thing before in my life!"

"Where did the balloon come from?"

"Will somebody show me the way out of this circus tent?"

"Everybody lift!" cried Jack.

The cadets did as ordered, some standing their guns up. The guns acted like short tent-poles, and the bag of the balloon was thus kept a short distance from the ground. Slowly one student after another crawled forth into the open air.

"Is anybody hurt?" asked Captain Putnam, anxiously.

"I was knocked down," came from Gus Coulter, and he showed where he had been rolled over in the dust.

"I was nearly smothered," said Mumps.

Nobody had been hurt, although not a few had been frightened when the weight of the monstrous

bag first settled down upon them. The balloon was rolled up and placed on one side of the road and the loose guns picked up.

"Guess it must be a runaway balloon," suggested Pepper.

"I believe it has been used for exhibition purposes," said Captain Putnam. "See there is a trapeze. Probably the performer jumped from the balloon and used a parachute for reaching the ground."

"Was there to be an exhibition around here?" asked Jack.

"I believe one was advertised to take place at Menville. The wind is blowing from that direction."

There was nothing to do but to leave the balloon by the roadside, and after a brushing up and a readjustment of equipments the battalion moved on once more. Half a mile was covered when they were halted by two men in a long farm-wagon.

"Excuse me!" shouted one of the men. "But have you seen anything of a balloon around here?"

"I should say we had," answered Captain Putnam, who was marching by Jack's side. "It came down in the roadway, directly on our heads."

"What! I reckon you were scared," and the man grinned.

"We shouldn't care to repeat the experiment," said the captain, coldly. "Some of my students were knocked down, and if they had not held up the balloon with their guns they might have been smothered."

"Guess that's right," said the other man in the wagon. "I am sorry for you."

"So am I sorry," said the first man who had spoken. "Where is the balloon?"

"About half a mile back on the road."

"Thanks; we'll get it."

"Whose balloon is it?" asked Jack, curiously.

"It belongs to Professor Aireo," was the answer. "He made an ascension about an hour ago at Menville and came down with his parachute. I hope the balloon is all right."

"It appeared to be," answered Jack, and then the two men drove off and the battalion proceeded on its way.

The road was rather rough, and two hours later the cadets came to another halt. A farmhouse was handy and they procured a drink at a fine old well where the water was both pure and cold. The farmer, who was present, told them to help themselves, and as he had a crate of strawberries ready to take to market, the captain pur-

chased them and took them along, for use at the camp.

It was nightfall when Smalley Lake was reached. Some large flatboats were at hand, and on these the boys were rowed over to the island, and the camping outfit followed, the wagons and horses being left at a farm running down to the lake.

"What a fine spot for a camp!" cried Dale, on reaching the island.

It certainly was a nice place. The island was some acres in extent, containing a small grove of trees, a fine patch of grass, and a bit of smooth, sandy beach which would be very fine for bathing.

The tents were pitched on the grass, and after a rest Captain Putnam allowed some of the boys to take a dip in the lake. Then campfires were lit and supper cooked, to which the boys did full justice, topping off the meal with the strawberries that had been brought along.

"I don't think we'll have any fun to-night," said Andy. "Everybody is too tired." And he was right. The cadets were glad to rest and went to sleep without a murmur, only the guards remaining active. Each cadet had to go on guard two hours each night, in true military style.

"Oh, phsaw! It's raining!" cried Pepper, on rising the following morning. "Isn't that too bad!"

"I don't think it will last," said Jack, and he was right. By eight o'clock the rain stopped and soon after the sun came out good and strong, drying the grass rapidly. Breakfast was had, followed by a short drill, and then the cadets were told that they could do as they pleased until dinner-time. Some went bathing, others fishing, and a few just lolled around, taking it easy. Baxter and his crowd strolled off by themselves, to smoke some cigarettes Reff Ritter had purchased at the cross-roads hotel on the sly.

"Let us take a walk," suggested Dale to Pepper and some of the others, and soon they were on the way, going first along the shore and then into the wood. Here it was cool and pleasant, and they enjoyed it thoroughly.

"Couldn't a fellow have a fine time here if there wasn't a big crowd?" said Dale. "Just think of six or seven of us with the whole island to ourselves!"

"It would be dandy," answered Andy.

Having rested awhile in the woods, they moved on, until they came to a sort of shelter among the rocks. Looking through the bushes they saw Reff Ritter moving around.

"It's the Ritter crowd," said Jack, in a low voice.

"Wonder what they are up to?" said Pepper. "I am going to see." And the Imp moved forward before anybody could stop him.

When Pepper was close enough he made out six boys seated in a circle. They were smoking cigarettes and talking in low but earnest voices.

"We can do it," Dan Baxter was saying.

"Maybe we'll get caught," put in Mumps.

"No, we won't," came from Reff Ritter. "It's a boss plan. We'll carry it out to-night, and make somebody feel sick."

"Better see if anybody is around," cried Gus Coulter, and leaped up. Pepper had just time enough to regain his companions when the whole party was discovered. At once the Baxter crowd put away their cigarettes.

"Hullo, are you following us?" demanded Reff Ritter, striding forward.

"I guess you are following us," said Pepper, quickly.

"Why should we follow you?" asked Jack.

At this Ritter and Baxter muttered something the others could not understand. Then the bully of the Hall and his cronies walked away to another part of the island.

"They are up to something," said Pepper to his friends, and told what he had heard.

"It will pay to watch out to-night," said Dale.

That afternoon the boys had a swimming match, in which over twenty cadets participated. The match was won by Harry Blossom, with Andy second, Bart third, Hogan fourth, and Gus Coulter fifth. Reff Ritter was in the match, but dropped out when he saw he could not win.

"I got a cramp in my big toe," he said, but nobody believed him.

In the evening a happy time was had around the campfires and at ten o'clock the cadets turned in. Hogan and Stuffer were on guard, along with a number of others. Each guard had to walk up and down on his post, and that was all.

Pepper was dozing away when Andy pulled him by the arm.

"Something is doing," whispered the acrobatic youth.

The Imp was wide-awake on the instant, and so were Dale and Harry, who were sleeping close by. Jack, as major, was in another tent.

Some shadows were moving around, and presently Andy and Pepper saw three cadets steal into the tent and lift up some uniforms and equipments. Instantly they leaped up, and caught two of the intruders.

"No, you don't!" cried Andy. "Drop those uniforms!"

"Let me go!" muttered the other fellow, and Andy recognized Dan Baxter's voice. Pepper had Reff Ritter, while Dale got hold of Nick Paxton. The latter slipped flat on his back and Dale came down upon him heavily.

"Oh! Get off of me!" grunted Paxton. "You are smashing in my ribs!"

"What does this mean?" demanded Dale, and caught his prisoner by the arm.

"It's only a joke," grumbled Paxton.

"What kind of a joke?"

"We—we were going to hide your uniforms, that's all!"

"Oh, that's it!" said Pepper. "Well, it didn't work, and out you go!" And he gave Reff Ritter a shove that sent him headlong on the ground outside of the tent. Dan Baxter was also pushed out, and Paxton was flung on top of the bully. All three picked themselves up as quickly as they could and sneaked off.

"Coulter wasn't with them," whispered Pepper. "He and Mumps and Sabine must be trying the trick elsewhere. Let us go out and investigate."

The others agreed, and slipping on some clothing they sallied forth in the darkness. Only a

few stars were shining, so they had to pick their way with care among the tents.

"Wait, there is somebody—coming from Jack's tent!" whispered Pepper, and the next moment the Imp had a fellow by the collar, while Andy and Dale caught the second cadet. They were Coulter and Sabine, and they had Jack's uniform, his hat, shoes, and likewise the young major's sword.

"Let us alone, will you?" growled Coulter, in a cowed tone.

"Sure, we will!" cried Pepper. "Dale, put those things back, will you?"

While Dale did so, Pepper and Andy held Coulter and Sabine. Jack slept on, totally unconscious of what was taking place.

Despite their protests, Coulter and Sabine were made to march back to the tent from which the other cadets had come. Then they were blindfolded.

"We'll put them through the forty-fourth degree," said Pepper.

The others understood what this meant, and in a twinkling the prisoners had their hands bound behind them.

"Let me go!" whined Billy Sabine. "Please don't hurt me!"

"We won't hurt you. Keep still,"

"If you don't let us go, we'll raise an alarm," said Coulter.

"If you do we'll tell how you tried to steal Major Ruddy's things."

"We weren't going to steal them. We were only going to hide them."

"It amounts to the same thing. March!" said the Imp.

"Where to?"

"You'll soon find out."

The prisoners were marched to one end of the camp where there were some low bushes. Then Pepper began to whisper, but in a voice so that Coulter and Sabine could hear.

"Fix the bayonets all around, and don't forget to set the traps. That's it, now set that trap too. If they dare to move, well, they'll wish they hadn't, that's all."

"You don't want to kill them," whispered Dale, entering into the spirit of the fun.

"They won't get killed. It will only nip 'em pretty bad—if they move," answered Pepper.

He opened and shut his pocketknife several times with sharp clicks. Then he announced that all was ready.

"Now don't move—don't budge—unless you want to fall into a sharp trap," said the Imp, to the two prisoners.

"Ho—how long must we stay here?" asked Sabine, in a trembling voice.

"We'll be back before sunrise and fix it so you can get away," answered Andy.

Then the three boys withdrew and left the two prisoners alone.

Neither Coulter nor Sabine dared to move, thinking they would run into some sharp steel-trap, or sword point, and hurt themselves.

"This is awful!" groaned Coulter. "Hang the luck anyway!"

"If we get cut with a rusty trap we may get lockjaw," groaned Sabine. "I heard of a boy who got caught in a bear-trap once and he died from blood-poisoning."

Andy, Pepper, and Dale watched the prisoners for a while and then went back to their tent. Here they were joined by Hogan and Stuffer, coming in from guard duty.

There was a brief consultation of war, and it was decided that Baxter, Ritter, and the others must be paid back for what they had attempted to do.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GENERAL ALARM

BAXTER and his chums were just getting to sleep, having grown tired of waiting for the return of Sabine and Coulter, when the bully awoke with a start.

"What's that?" he cried, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

Before him he saw a curious figure jumping up and down. It gave forth a curious glow of light.

"You can't fool me!" he cried, and leaped from his cot,—to pitch headlong over an empty barrel.

"What's up?" came from Reff Ritter, and he too got up and bumped into a bag of flour hanging on a level with his head. Down came the bag, and the flour flew in all directions, nearly smothering Mumps, who was still sleeping.

"What's this?" spluttered the bully's toady.
"Who threw flour over me!"

He too arose, and fell into a lot of loose tin-ware, creating a great racket. Then came a crash of another sort.

"Look out, the tent is coming down!" called out Ritter, and tried to get out. But he too fell over the empty barrel, and the next moment down came the tent, burying all three of the boys and making more noise than ever.

"Run!" called out Pepper, who had arranged the affair, and he and his chums ran and were soon out of sight.

The noise awoke Captain Putnam and George Strong, who were sleeping in a tent close by. Both ran out, and a lantern was lit.

"What's the trouble here?" demanded the captain.

"A tent is down," answered George Strong. "Some students' fun, I presume."

Soon Baxter, Ritter, and Mumps crawled from under the collapsed tent, making a great noise among the tinware as they did so. Then a crowd began to collect.

"Fenwick! What in the world is the matter with your face?" cried Captain Putnam.

"It's flour, sir," answered Mumps. "Somebody nearly smothered me with flour."

"They played a trick on us," growled Dan Baxter. "There was a noise and I got up and saw a make-believe ghost—some phosphorus on some dangling shingles. I started to get up, and then somebody pulled the tent down on our heads."

Some of the cadets began to snicker at this. More lanterns were lit, and while some of those present started to repair the damage that had been done, Captain Putnam took a lantern and walked around the camp. Seeing something behind some bushes, he walked thither and came to where Coulter and Sabine were still standing blindfolded and with their hands tied behind them.

"What are you doing here?" asked the master of the Hall, in amazement.

"Oh, Captain Putnam, is that you?" asked Sabine. "Will you help us?"

"What is the trouble?"

"We are afraid of the traps," said Coulter.

"Traps? I see no traps," and Captain Putnam flashed around the rays of his lantern. Then he set the light down and untied the prisoners' hands, and the cloths over their eyes were also removed.

"Well, I never!" cried Coulter, looking around.

"Not a single trap, or a bayonet!" murmured Sabine. "We have been fooled."

"Go back to your tent at once!" cried Captain Putnam, sharply. "I want no more nonsense this night."

The balance of the night passed quietly enough, for the cadets were afraid to prow around, not knowing who might be on guard. In the morning

there were a good many laughs, but Dan Baxter and his crowd did not join in.

Down at the general store at the cross-roads Pepper had purchased some firecrackers and also some seidlitz powders. Watching his chance that morning he took the white-paper powders and dumped them in the milk the Baxter crowd was using. Then he dumped the other powders into their sugar.

"Guess I'll have some coffee now," said Baxter, and got himself a cup. Then he put in some of the doctored milk and followed with some of the doctored sugar. Several of the others did the same.

An instant later Baxter's coffee began to bubble and foam and then went up like a geyser. The bully was so astonished he let the cup fall with a smash.

"Great Scott! What's up with the coffee!"

"My coffee is going to explode!" shrieked Mumps, and threw his cup in some bushes.

"This is awful!" cried Coulter. "Why, what in the world is the matter with it?"

"Say, Ferris, what did you do to that coffee?" demanded Ritter, striding up to the cadet who had made the beverage.

"I boiled it, that's all," answered Ferris. "It's good, too," he added.

"Did you put in some baking powder?" sneered Baxter.

"Not at all," and now Ferris himself tasted some of the coffee he had in his pot. "Why, that's fine."

"Give me another cup of it," said Baxter.

It certainly looked good and he put in some milk. Then he added the sugar as before. At once the coffee bubbled and foamed worse than before.

"Look there!" he cried, rushing forward with the coffee running over the cup and on to the ground. "What do you say to that?"

"Hullo, Baxter has got Mount Vesuvius brand of coffee!" cried Andy.

"Why don't you bottle it for mineral water?" asked Pepper.

"Oh, shut up!" cried the bully.

"I think I'll try some milk," said Mumps. "Phew, what a flavor!"

To sweeten it he put in some sugar, and at once he had the milk boiling and foaming.

"This is what's the matter!" cried Reff Ritter. "It's the milk and sugar that is doctored. Somebody put seidlitz powders in them!"

"Dump the sugar and milk away," said the bully, and this was done. Then the crowd had to get a new lot before they could go ahead with

their meal. Pepper and his chums had a hearty laugh over the incident.

That night, when Pepper was on guard duty, he took his package of firecrackers with him and during his spare time fixed some of the crackers so that they would have extra long stems, made of nothing but ordinary cotton cord. Then, when he was off duty, he placed the firecrackers around the camp, lighting each fuse as he did so.

"Now wait, and you'll see some fun," he whispered to Andy, Dale, and the others.

For a few minutes there was silence, and then one of the crackers went off. It was of good size and the noise sounded like a gun shot.

"Corporal of the guard!" came the cry.

"What post?" was the question asked by the corporal, as he rushed out of his tent.

He had scarcely spoken when another firecracker went off with a loud bang.

"Something must surely be wrong," murmured Captain Putnam, as he sprang up and donned part of his clothing. "There goes another shot!"

He ran outside and soon found the bewildered corporal of the guard, who was running around asking the various pickets who had fired the shots.

"I can't find where the shots came from," said the corporal, and just then came two more explosions, followed by a third.

As it happened, the explosions came from different sides of the camp, so Captain Putnam was as much bewildered as anybody. By this time all of the cadets were stirring, for it had been ordered that no shot should be fired unless something was really wrong.

"Must be thieves in the camp!"

"Maybe some wild beasts!"

"I think it is some bears," said Andy, in a loud voice.

"Bears!" screamed Mumps, and the cry was taken up on all sides. "Oh, I don't want to meet any bears!"

"Nonsense! There are no bears on this island," said Captain Putnam. "They must be shooting at something else."

"Let us go around and investigate," said George Strong, and brought out his revolver, while the master of Putnam Hall did the same.

During this time the firecrackers continued to go off, by ones, twos, and threes. Then came the explosion of a dozen or more.

"My gracious, what can this mean?" ejaculated the captain. "All of the guards must be firing at once."

"Perhaps it is a box of cartridges that got on fire," suggested George Strong.

The corporal of the guard had been out to one

of the posts, when an explosion took place just behind him, causing him to leap wildly into the air. He looked back, saw something burning, and picked it up.

"Here you are!" he called, rushing back to Captain Putnam. "I know what is up now."

"Humph! A firecracker!" said the master of the school. "Who is setting them off, Pell?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Ah! nothing but firecrackers," said Dan Baxter, in disgust. "I am going to bed again."

"So am I," added Reff Ritter.

All waited for a few minutes longer, but no more explosions followed, and finally Captain Putnam told the cadets to retire, while he and George Strong took a walk through the camp to make certain that everything was all right.

"Come with me," whispered Andy to his chums. "Don't go to bed yet." And he led them to the rear of the tent occupied by Dan Baxter and his cronies.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ATTACK AND A FIGHT

"WHAT'S doing, Andy?"

"Wait and see. You won't have to wait long."

The bully of Putnam Hall and his cronies were sleepy and soon tumbled on their cots. They had scarcely gotten under the blankets when a general cry arose.

"Oh, my! I'm stuck full of pins!"

"Ouch! Something is sticking me in the middle of the back!"

"Ker-chew! Who—ker-chew!—put this—ker-chew!—pepper on my—ker-chew!—cot?"

"My cot is full of burrs!"

"There are thistles in mine!"

Groans and muttered imprecations followed. Dan Baxter and his cronies were wild with rage. They had to light a lantern and clean their cots and blankets with care. The boys outside sneaked to their own quarters, laughing heartily to themselves.

"When did you do it, Andy?" asked Dale.

"While the shooting was going on. I got the burrs and thistles while I was out walking this afternoon."

"They won't forget this encampment in a hurry," said Pepper, with a grin.

"Look out that they don't pay us back."

There was other fun afloat that night, but our friends did not hear of it until morning. Then Jack brought the news.

"We are in a pickle now," announced the young major.

"What's up, Jack?" questioned Pepper.

"Every boat is gone."

"The boats gone!" cried Harry Blossom.

"Where did they go to?"

"Nobody seems to know."

"Did they drift away?"

"I think not. Mr. Strong and myself saw that they were tied up last evening."

"Some of the fellows must have used them," said Andy.

"And forgot to tie them fast afterwards," suggested Dale.

"Or else they hid the boats just for fun," said Pepper.

Jack looked at his friends questioningly.

"See here, boys, please remember that I am the major at this encampment," he began, seriously.

"We know it, Jack," said Andy, quickly. "I, for one, know nothing of the boats."

"And neither do I," came from each of the others.

"Maybe it is the work of the Baxter crowd," said Dale.

Two hours were spent in looking for the boats. Then a farmer was seen approaching the island in a small scow which had seen better days.

"Say, did you folks lose any boats?" he asked.

"Yes," said George Strong, who was near. "All we had."

"Well, they drifted down to my farm. Shall I bring 'em up?"

"If you will."

"What is it worth, mister?" asked the farmer, who did not believe in working gratuitously.

Captain Putnam was called, and he told the farmer he would give two dollars to have the boats brought back.

"Can I go along and help, Captain?" asked Andy.

"Yes, you can go, and Conners can go with you," answered Captain Putnam.

The boys were soon in the scow, and the farmer took them to the extreme end of the lake. Here they found all of the boats the school had used, drifted under some overhanging bushes.

"They are all tied together," said Andy. "That looks as if they were taken away from the island on purpose."

"You didn't take them away, did you?" asked Bart Conners, of the farmer.

"Me? Not much. I was asleep last night," was the answer. "I heard you shootin' over to the island, but I didn't git up."

Andy leaped into one of the boats and picked up a cigarette butt and then another.

"I guess I know the crowd who did this," said the acrobatic youth.

"Perhaps I do too," said Bart, pointedly. "The same crowd that set the old boathouse on fire, eh?"

"Exactly."

The cadets and the farmer took the boats back to the island. George Strong came down to inspect the craft and pay the farmer off.

"Humph!" said the teacher, as he saw the remains of the cigarettes. He said no more, but later on talked the matter over with Captain Putnam.

Saturday night found the cadets back at Putnam Hall, safe and sound. The march back to the school had been without special incident. The walk told on some of the students, and on Sunday many of them were content to do little but

rest and eat their meals. By the majority the outing was voted a complete success. Baxter and his cronies did not appreciate it so much and wanted to "get square" with somebody for the tricks that had been played.

Once more the boys settled down to the regular routine. Many of them wanted to make a good showing when it came to the examinations and so applied themselves diligently to their studies. But some, including Reff Ritter and Dan Baxter, cared very little if they came out near the head or not.

"I expect to take a trip with my father before long," said Dan Baxter. "I hope he takes me out of the school before the examinations come off."

"Wish I was going away," grumbled Ritter. "It's mighty dull these days."

For some reason Dan Baxter got it into his head that Pepper was responsible for all the troubles he had had, and one afternoon, when in a particularly ugly mood, he followed the Imp to the end of the campus.

"Say, Ditmore, you are getting pretty fresh, ain't you?" he blustered.

"Thanks, Baxter, but I certainly shouldn't wish to grow stale," answered Pepper, coolly.

"I don't like the way you are talking about me,"

"I don't know as I have talked about you—at least, not lately."

"Oh, you needn't try to crawl out of it," went on the bully in a loud tone, while a crowd began to collect.

"I am not crawling out of anything."

"Maybe you'd like me to give you a good licking, eh?" went on Baxter, working himself up into a rage.

"I have no desire to fight. But if you——"

"Bah! Take that!" cried the bully, and without warning hit Pepper a stinging blow on the chin. The Imp was not prepared for the attack and went flat on his back on the grass.

"For shame, Baxter!" cried Harry Blossom, who had just come up. "That wasn't fair at all!"

"You keep your oar out!" snarled the bully. "I know what I am doing."

Slowly Pepper rose to his feet, a good deal dazed.

"Have you had enough?" demanded the bully, striding up with clenched fists.

"Do you call that fighting fair?" asked Pepper, slowly.

"Oh, I don't want any gas!"

"Baxter you are a bully and a brute!"

The big cadet glared at the speaker in amaze-

ment. Then he made another lunge forward, but his fist met only the empty air, for Pepper ducked just in time.

"I'll fix you!" roared Baxter, as he staggered forward and then recovered himself.

"I didn't want to fight, but since you force me to defend myself, why—take that!"

As Pepper finished he let out with his right fist and took the bully fairly and squarely in the ear. Then the Imp swung around his left fist and it came in contact with Baxter's nose and made the blood spurt. The bully staggered, but before he went down there came another blow that loosened one of his teeth.

"Now have you had enough?" asked Pepper, standing over the fallen form of the bully.

"No!" snarled Baxter, and as quickly as he could he got on his feet. But the instant he was up again, Pepper knocked him down.

"I am going to give you a dose of your own medicine, Baxter," said the Imp. "If you try to get up again, down you go once more."

"Boys! boys! what does this mean?" came in a stern voice, and looking up they saw Captain Putnam approaching.

CHAPTER XXV

JACK MAKES A DISCOVERY

DAN BAXTER was evidently much chagrined. Pepper stood his ground and looked the master of Putnam Hall squarely in the face.

"Don't you know that fighting is against the rules of this institution?" said Captain Putnam.

"Captain Putnam, I have not been fighting," answered Pepper, as coolly as he could.

"Not fighting? Do you deny that you just knocked Baxter down?"

"No, sir, I do not deny it. I knocked him down twice."

"And yet you do not call that fighting?"

"I do not, sir."

"Well, what is it then?"

"I was walking out here when Baxter came up. He began to pick a quarrel, and without warning, as some of these boys can testify, he struck me in the chin and knocked me flat on my back. That made me angry and when I got up he struck at me again. Then I sailed in and knocked him down twice."

"It ain't so," muttered Dan Baxter. "He started the quarrel."

"No! no!" came from several.

"It started just as Pepper says," put in Harry. "It was a mean thing for Baxter to attack Pepper without warning."

"That's what it was," said another student standing by.

"You fellows shut up!" roared Dan Baxter. "If you don't I'll——" He stopped short in confusion.

"Why did you attack him, Baxter?" asked the master of the school.

"Oh, he's getting too airish," said the bully, not stopping to think twice.

"Then you admit that you did attack him first?"

At this the bully grew red in the face.

"Well—er—I had good cause."

"Both of you come to my office," said the captain, and he also asked half a dozen of the others to come along. At the office the matter was carefully investigated.

"Ditmore, you may go," said the master of Putnam Hall. "It was not just right for you to do as you did, yet I do not blame you for defending yourself. Baxter, you can remain." And then all left the office but the bully. After the

others had gone Captain Putnam read the bully a stern lecture. This captain had found out about the smoking and drinking at the old boathouse, and told the bully in very plain words that such practices would not be permitted around the academy.

"I presume the boathouse caught fire by accident," said Captain Putnam.

"I—I guess it did," said Baxter, meekly.

"It was a mean piece of business all the way through—and doubly mean to try to throw suspicion on some other cadets."

"They did mean things to me, too," grumbled the bully, and then he was glad to make his escape from the office.

It made Dan Baxter feel sick to face the school after his encounter with Pepper. Everybody was talking of how the Imp had polished off the bully. Baxter was glad enough when he received a telegram from his father asking him to leave Putnam Hall.

"I'm going on a trip and I shan't be back for some time," said Baxter to his cronies.

"You're in luck," answered Reff Ritter. "Wish I was going."

"If you can, square up with Pepper Ditmore and his crowd," went on the bully.

"We'll do that," put in Gus Coulter.

On the very day that Dan Baxter left Putnam Hall to go on a trip with his father, Pepper, Jack, and Andy received an invitation from the Fords to visit their summer home at Point View Lodge, not many miles away. The day was bright, and the roads seeming fine they went over on their bicycles.

"Here is where the Bock crowd once held us up," said Jack, as they were riding through the woods. "Do you remember?"

"We are not likely to forget it," said Andy. "Nor to forget how we shot the tiger that had escaped from the circus."

"Which puts me in mind of something," said Pepper. "Do you remember about that balloon that came down on us?"

"Of course."

"Well, the balloonist, Professor Aireo, is going to give an exhibition next Saturday at Datport, in connection with some sort of soldiers' reunion. I'd like to ride over and see him."

"Let us do it—if we can get off," returned Andy; and so it was agreed.

When the boys arrived at the Ford mansion they found all of the family there to greet them. Refreshments were served, and then the young people went out in the garden to play croquet and lawn tennis. The girls wanted to know about

their life in camp, and smiled when told of the tricks that had been played.

"You certainly do have good times," said Laura.

"Do you ever see any more of Roy Bock and his crowd?" asked Pepper.

"No, and we don't wish to see them," answered Flossie, with a toss of her curly head.

After the games there was music on the piano and singing, and then some more refreshments, and all too quickly it was time for the boys to return to the Hall. All said they had had a splendid time.

"I am glad to hear it," said Mrs. Ford. "And do not forget to come again."

It was still light when the boys leaped on their bicycles and started along the forest road for Putnam Hall. All were in high spirits, and Andy, in front, set a pace which the others followed with difficulty.

"Be careful," said out Jack. "This road is none of the best."

"Oh, it's all right," answered the acrobatic youth. "Come on!" And he pushed ahead as hard as ever.

"I think this road is better than it used to be," said Pepper, after a mile and a half had been covered. "They must have——"

A crash ahead caused him to cut his speech short. They saw Andy fly over the handle-bars of his machine and land in some thick bushes. The bicycle spun around in the roadway and then fell, with the front wheel completely wrecked.

"Are you hurt, Andy?" asked Jack, slackening his pace just in time.

"I—I don't think I am," was the slow reply, as the acrobatic youth climbed out of the brush-wood. "Gosh! but that was a header, wasn't it?"

"How did it happen?" asked Pepper, who had gone ahead and now came back.

"I got in a rut and that threw me against yonder rock. I suppose I can be thankful that I didn't break my neck."

"The front wheel is done for," said Jack, examining the bicycle. "The spokes and the rim are both smashed."

"Then I reckon I'll have to walk home," said Andy, ruefully. "I reckon the old saying is true, 'The more haste the less speed.'"

"We can take turns at carrying you," said Jack. "One can carry you and the other the broken wheel."

"Can you do it—on such a road as this?"

"We can try it, anyway."

Andy got on the rear of Pepper's bicycle and

went on ahead, and Jack placed the broken wheel on his shoulder and followed on his own machine. Progress was slow, and long before the Hall was reached it was dark.

"Let us rest awhile," said Pepper. "This is hard work."

"I'll work one of the wheels for awhile," said Andy—"that is, when we start again."

The boys sat down by the side of the forest road to rest. Near by a tiny brook of cold water was trickling.

"There must be a spring near by," said Jack. "If there is, I'm going to have a drink."

"Ditto myself," said Pepper.

Jack walked off to look for the spring. He was gone only a few minutes when he came back in high excitement.

"I've made a discovery!" he cried, softly.

"What kind of a discovery?" asked Andy.

"I followed up the brook until I came to the spring, under a big overhanging rock. I was stooping down for a drink, when I caught the gleam of a campfire, through the trees. After I had my fill, I walked closer to the campfire to investigate. There I saw those two crazy relatives of Mr. Strong, Paul Shaff and Bart Callax!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MEN IN THE WOODS

JACK's announcement filled Andy and Pepper with surprise. They had not dreamed that the two missing men could be anywhere in that vicinity.

"You didn't make any mistake?" said Pepper.

"No, you can go and see for yourself. They have a regular camp located there."

The other boys were curious, and followed the young major along the brook and to the campfire beyond. True enough, Shaff and Callax were there, taking it easy beside the campfire. They had built themselves a rude shelter of tree-boughs and brushwood, in front of which was a beautiful rug. In front of a tree hung a looking-glass and on a bench rested a washbowl and a shoe-blackening outfit.

"Lay low—we don't want them to spot us," whispered Jack.

"What are they talking about?" whispered Andy.

"Everything in general. They are certainly crazy."

"We ought to let Mr. Strong know of this," said Pepper.

The boys watched the two men for some time and saw that it was probable they would remain in the camp that night.

"I have an idea," said Pepper. "Andy can ride to the school and tell Mr. Strong, while Jack and I watch the men. If they go away we can follow and see where they go to."

So it was arranged, and a little later Andy rode off on Jack's wheel. Jack and Pepper kept well out of sight, but made certain that Shaff and Callax should not slip them in the darkness which was now settling down upon all sides.

Andy took care that he should have no more accidents, and as a consequence it took him quite a while to reach Putnam Hall. Once there he asked at once for George Strong. The assistant teacher was in the library.

"I wish to see you in private, Mr. Strong," said the cadet, and having walked outside with the instructor, the acrobatic youth told his tale.

"This is indeed news," said George Strong. "We must capture them by all means. It is criminal to leave such dangerous characters at large."

Captain Putnam was informed of the affair, and he told Peleg Snuggers and another man around the place to go with George Strong and Andy. The carryall was brought out, with a pair of good horses, and away they started on a good gait for the camp in the woods.

They had just reached the spot where the bicycles had been left when they heard a blood-curdling cry. Then came a shout in Jack's voice.

"They have been discovered!" cried Andy, and leaped from the carryall, followed by George Strong and Peleg Snuggers.

"Look out, or they may shoot you!" said the general-utility man, taking good care to keep well to the rear.

Another shout, this time from Pepper, rang out, and then those who had just come up saw two men rush through the forest in the direction of the lake.

"There they go!" cried George Strong. "Stop, Paul! Stop, Bart!" he added.

"Let us alone!" said Callax. "Let us alone!"

"We don't want anything to do with you!" put in Shaff.

They made rapid progress through the forest and soon George Strong lost track of them. But then Jack sighted them again.

"There they go—straight for the lake!" shouted the young major.

"I see them," answered the teacher.

"They are getting into a boat," said Pepper, and he was right.

By the time the party gained the lake shore the two crazy men were in a rowboat and pulling rapidly across the lake. The others looked around, but not another craft of any sort was in sight.

"We have lost them again!" said George Strong, with something like a groan. "Too bad!"

"How did they discover you?" asked Andy, after the darkness had hidden the fleeing men.

"In the oddest kind of a way," explained Jack. "We were resting behind some bushes, when of a sudden the man named Callax leaped up and began to prance around the camp like a horse. He came straight for us, and landed within a few inches of my head. Then he let out a yell and that brought Shaff, and off they went like a pair of frightened rabbits."

Curious to know what sort of a camp the crazy men had had, George Strong went back to the spot and stirred up the campfire. He found there a good supply of clothing and also many odds and ends which made the boys smile.

"Perhaps they will come back," suggested Pepper.

"I will place a guard here," answered the teacher. "They may come back later. I doubt if they do so right away."

There was nothing to do but to return to Putnam Hall. The bicycles were strapped on the back of the carryall and all piled into the turnout. The lantern had already been lit; and thus they rode to the school, reaching the place a little after midnight.

"Keeping early hours, I see," remarked Dale, when Pepper came into the dormitory.

"Tell you about it in the morning," answered the Imp, and lost no time in getting to bed and to sleep.

"Those fellows will be the terror of this neighborhood if they keep on," said Dale, when he heard of what had occurred.

"Mr. Strong is going to set a sharper watch than ever," answered Jack. "Those men will be caught sooner or later."

Many of the cadets had heard of the soldiers' reunion at Datport, on the following Saturday, and also of the proposed balloon ascension, and they begged Captain Putnam for permission to visit the town and see what was going on.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said the master of

the school at last. "Every student who gets an average of eighty per cent. this week can go, if he wishes."

This put the students on their mettle, and never did cadets study harder than during that week. As a consequence about forty passed, and it was decided that they should visit Datport in the Hall carryall and the two Cedarville stages. The start was to be made at half-past six in the morning.

"Hurrah, we are to go!" shouted Andy. "Aren't you glad, Pep?"

"To be sure I am."

"It's Reff Ritter an' Coulter who are mad, so they are," came from Emerald.

"Didn't they pass?" asked Stuffer.

"They did not."

"I had a tight squeeze, with old Crabtree," came from Bart Conners. "He came close to cutting me out of the fun."

"The same here," said Henry Lee. "Oh, but I do wish we could get rid of him."

"Your wish is to be gratified—at least for awhile," said Joe Nelson. "I just got the news. Mr. Crabtree is going to Boston on business and may not come back for the balance of this term."

"Hurrah!" shouted several students in unison.

"I thought you would like to get up a petition,

asking him to remain," went on Joe, with a wink.

"Great hambones!" gasped Pepper. "Remain? Not for a thousand plates of ice cream!"

"He can stay away and he never will be missed," added Andy.

The boys were on hand promptly on Saturday morning, and after an early breakfast they piled into the carryall and the stages, and with shouts and cheers set off for Datport. Not one of them dreamed of the strange adventures and odd discovery ahead of them.

The way to Datport was level for the most part and the three turnouts made good time, the boys singing and cheering as they passed through villages and by prosperous farms. Many cheered and waved their hands in return. They were beginning to be known far and wide as "those Putnam Hall soldier boys."

"I see some of the old soldiers now!" cried Jack, as the turnouts approached the town where the reunion was to occur. And soon they reached a green where many old veterans were assembled. The cadets, in their neat uniforms, were given a warm welcome and soon made themselves at home.

"This is all right," said Pepper, as a fine band struck up a patriotic air. "I am glad I came."

"I want to see that balloon ascension," returned Andy.

"Wouldn't you like to go up, Andy?" asked Jack, by way of a joke.

"Sure I would," was the quick answer.

"Do you really mean it, Andy?" asked Dale.

"I certainly do—I shouldn't like anything better."

"I'd be afraid to go up," said Hogan. "I'll take my balloon trips on the ground, so I will!"

The balloon ascension was advertised for two o'clock in the afternoon, and after listening to an address by an old army general, and getting some lunch, the cadets walked to the field where the balloon was located.

"Hullo! How are you?" said a man to Jack, and the young major recognized him as one of the pair who had come out in the farm-wagon after the balloon when the battalion had been on the march.

"First-rate," answered Jack. "Found your balloon, eh?"

"Oh, yes, and all right, too. Much obliged."

"Say, doesn't the professor want somebody to go up with him?" asked Andy, brushing forward.

"I guess not!" said another man, standing by.

"Not a greenhorn, anyway."

"Where is the professor?"

"In his tent yonder, getting ready for the exhibition."

The balloon was in a small roped-off enclosure and some men were at work filling it with hot air. Beside the balloon rested a big basket. It had been advertised that the professor would take somebody up with him provided that person would remain in the balloon after the aëronaut cut loose with his parachute, but so far nobody had come forward to take up the offer.

CHAPTER XXVII

UP IN A BALLOON

"THIS would just suit me to death," said Andy, as he gazed with longing eyes at the balloon.

"Get in the basket and see how it feels," suggested Jack.

The acrobatic youth was quick to comply. The men working around were good-natured and did not interfere.

"Come in here with me," said Andy, and Pepper and Jack did as requested. Then Andy began to examine the ropes which held the basket to the balloon.

"The balloon is filling," said Jack.

"Hi, what are you fellows doing in that balloon?" came from Nick Paxton, as he strode up. He was the only one of the Baxter crowd that had come to the celebration.

"That is none of your business," answered Pepper.

At that moment came a shout from another

part of the grounds. Then followed a big explosion.

"The cannon has burst!"

"Somebody must be killed!"

The excitement was intense and for the moment the balloon was forgotten. Hundreds rushed over to where some gunners had been discharging the old town cannon.

"My son was helpin' to fire that!" said a man who was working on the balloon ropes. "I must see if he was hurt!" And off he ran.

"My brother was helping to load the cannon," said another, and off he went likewise.

They had scarcely left when a sudden gust of wind made the big balloon give a tug at the ropes.

"Say, we'll have to get out of this basket," ejaculated Jack. "It isn't safe."

"Just what I was thinking," answered Pepper.

"Oh, don't be afraid," came from Andy.

"Perhaps—— Oh!"

The acrobatic youth's remark came to a sudden stop, for just then the balloon gave another tug. Crack! snap! went some ropes, and in a twinkling up went the basket, carrying the three cadets with it.

"Hold fast!" gasped Jack. "If you don't, you'll be killed!"

He clutched at the rim of the basket and so did the others. Almost before they knew it they were a hundred feet above the crowd.

"The balloon has gone up!"

"Three of those cadets are in it!"

"Andy, Jack, and Pepper!" came from Stuffer.

"Hi! come back you!" he added.

"I wish we could," murmured Pepper.

The balloon attendants were clutching at a rope that was trailing along the ground. Dale and Stuffer leaped forward to aid them, and all were quickly raised from their feet. Seeing they could not stop the balloon, they dropped to the ground, Dale landing on Paxton's shoulders and sending him to the grass with a thud.

The excitement on the exhibition grounds was intense, one half of the folks gathering around the exploded cannon and the other half watching the sailing balloon. Fortunately it was found that nobody had been seriously hurt by the wrecking of the field-piece, for which everybody was thankful.

"Who let that balloon go?" stormed Professor Aireo, as he came rushing from his tent. "Who did it?" And he stormed around wildly.

"She got away, Bill, that's all I can tell," said one of the attendants.

"I'll make somebody pay damages," stormed



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the professor, who in private life was plain Bill Jones.

"Better get the balloon back first," put in a man standing near.

In the meantime the balloon went up higher and higher, until it was a good six hundred feet in the air. Then the wind caught it and sent it whirling over the town and some green fields beyond.

"Wh—where are we going to?" asked Pepper, still clutching the basket with a deathlike grip.

"Don't ask me," answered Jack. "I'll be thankful if we are not upset and cast out!"

"We won't be upset, so long as we remain in the air," answered Andy, who, now that the first excitement was over, was quite cool. "I must say I rather enjoy this."

"Then go ahead and enjoy it," grumbled Pepper.

"Do you feel dizzy?" asked the acrobatic youth.

"Just a little. The sudden rush upward made me light-headed. But it is going away now," answered the Imp.

On and on sailed the balloon. For the time being Andy was the only one of the three who dared to look downward, and he announced that the town had been left far behind.

"We are sailing over a patch of woods," he announced. "Beyond is a hill of rocks."

"Oh, I hope we don't tumble on the rocks," said Jack.

"We are not going to tumble, I tell you, Jack. This balloon will sail for miles before it begins to settle."

A little while later Jack and Pepper ventured to take a peep at what was below. They could see the farms, with the houses and barns looking like toy buildings. Here and there was a silver thread, where some brook ran into the lake.

"I think we are moving towards the lake," announced Andy, some time later.

"If we go down in the lake we'll be drowned," said Jack.

"We'll have to swim for it," answered Andy, cheerfully. "If we get too close to the water we can take off our coats and kick off our shoes. We ought all to be able to swim to shore."

In five minutes more they crossed another patch of woods and came out over the lake. Far below them was a sailboat, and the occupants looked up at the balloon in astonishment.

"We are surely going down!" cried Pepper.

The balloon made a big dip, coming to within two hundred feet of the lake surface. They were preparing to shed their coats and shoes when a

gust took them upward once more and back to the shore.

"We are not going down just yet," said Andy. "But I think the balloon will settle before long."

"Where are we?" asked Jack.

"In the air," said Pepper, who could not resist the temptation to joke.

"I don't know where we are," answered Andy. "But there is a wild lot of timber and rocks below us," he added, after a searching look downward.

The balloon continued to move onward, but kept lowering constantly. Then came a sudden jolt to the basket.

"We hit a tree-top," announced Andy. "We must be on our guard now!"

But once more the balloon took an upward turn, and the forest remained a good hundred feet below them. Then the wind appeared to die out utterly and the balloon ceased to move forward.

"This is all right," said Andy. "Now, fellows, prepare to catch hold of a limb or something, when we go down."

All were on the alert and watched the gradual settling of the big balloon with interest. The hot air had become cooled, and in a few seconds the basket struck the top of a tree and went over.

The three cadets were spilled out in a most undignified fashion. They caught hold of the limbs as best they could and swung themselves towards the tree trunk. Then the balloon settled down over the top of the tree, forming a regular tent.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THREE BOYS AND THREE DOGS

"ARE you all right, Jack?"

"Yes."

"How about you, Pep?"

"As right as a button. Say, that was a ride worth talking about, wasn't it?"

"I should say it was," said the young major. "I must say, though, I shouldn't care for another like it."

"It suits me to a T!" cried Andy. "I don't know but what I'd like to be a balloon acrobat."

The weight of the big balloon made the upper branches of the tree bend far down, while a few of them were broken. Fearing the whole top of the tree might snap off, the three cadets climbed down with caution until they reached the ground.

"Here we are, safe and sound!" cried Andy, doing a handspring, just to work off his high spirits.

"Don't crow, Andy; we are not yet out of the woods," returned Jack, with a faint smile.

"It seems to me we are much in the woods," came from Pepper, as he gazed around. "I must confess I haven't the least idea where we are."

"I know," said Jack, dryly.

"Where?"

"On the ground. There, that pays you back for telling me we were in the air awhile ago."

"We must have sailed seven or eight miles at least," said Andy. "Remember, the breeze was a pretty fair one."

"I thought we came about fifty miles," answered Pepper. "And we seemed to be about five miles high."

"You couldn't live at five miles, you know that," answered Jack, quickly. "Science teaches that——"

"Oh, bother science, unless it can connect us with a refreshment stand," interrupted Pepper. "I am awfully dry, and hungry too."

They gazed around them. On all sides was the tall timber. The ground was very uneven and rocky in spots. Some of the rocks were damp, but they could not locate any spring or brook.

"The first thing to do is to get out of this woods," said Jack. "Then perhaps we can strike a farmhouse and get some refreshments. I am

not hungry, but I'd like to have a drink of cold water."

"Maybe you'd refuse a nice piece of pie?" said Pepper, sarcastically. "Or some fresh doughnuts?"

"Stop, Pep!" cried Andy. "I am getting hungry now. Come on!"

"Where to?"

"Out of the woods."

"Which way?"

That was the question, and the three cadets stared around them helplessly.

"By the sun the lake must be in that direction," said Jack. "Let us try to reach the water. Perhaps we can hail some passing boat."

The others agreed, and leaving the balloon where it was, they made their way among the tall trees for a distance of several rods.

"Hullo! here's a road!" cried Andy. "This must lead to somewhere. We are in luck."

"But it doesn't lead down to the lake," said Jack.

However, it was decided to follow the road for awhile, which seemed to pass from the woods quarter of a mile further on. Then they came to an apple orchard, but, of course, none of the apples were ripe.

"Hark! I hear some dogs approaching!"

ejaculated Jack, a few minutes later. "I hope they are not unfriendly."

"They are bulldogs!" came from Pepper. "Say, I don't like this at all!"

"Nor I," added Andy, as the dogs came closer. There were three bulldogs, all of large size, and each looked particularly savage.

The three boys did not know what to do, but as the bulldogs came closer, Andy ran for a nearby tree. The others followed, and all got up into the tree just as the animals reached the vicinity.

The dogs were baying loudly, and as they gathered under the tree, they snapped and snarled in anything but a pleasant fashion. They had evidently run quite a distance, for they looked hot.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," remarked Jack. "We got out of one difficulty only to tumble into another."

"Thanks, but I don't want to tumble just now," answered Pepper, with a shake of his head. "I don't think those brutes would like anything better than to chew us up."

"I wonder if I can beat them off with a stick?" said Andy, beginning to cut off a tree-bough with his pocketknife.

"I don't think so, but you can try it," answered the young major.

The stick was cut and Andy let himself down to a lower limb. He hit one of the dogs just once. Then the animal made a leap, caught hold of the stick, and had not Andy let go he would have been jerked to the ground. As it was he swung clear around the limb and only his acrobatic skill saved him.

"Don't you try that again," warned Pepper.

"Don't think I will. Gosh! he almost had me; didn't he?"

The dogs made themselves at home under the tree, lying down, but keeping their eyes fixed on the prisoners. The moment one of the lads moved there would be a growl from below.

"They'd make good camp guards, if they were trained," said Pepper, with a sorry kind of a grin.

"This is no laughing matter," expostulated Jack.

"Don't think I'm laughing. I'd give a week's spending money to be out of this right now."

"Ditto here," said Andy.

A half-hour went by and still the dogs remained at the foot of the tree. Occasionally one would walk around a bit and growl, but that was all. The boys tried everything they could think of to chase the brutes away, but without avail.

"I think I see somebody coming!" said Andy, later on. He had climbed to the top of the tree to make observations.

"Let us yell for help," suggested Pepper, and all three immediately set up as loud a shout as their lungs would permit. At first there was no reply, but then a faint hello came back, and Andy saw the man running towards them.

"If he owns the dogs he'll aid us," said the acrobatic youth.

"Yes, but if he doesn't what is he to do?" asked Jack, quickly. "We ought to warn him."

Again they set up a shout:

"Look out for the dogs!"

"What's that?" asked the man, coming to a halt.

"Look out for the dogs."

"Three bulldogs?"

"Yes."

"That's all right—the dogs are mine."

"Good enough," murmured Jack. "Now we'll get some help, I hope."

The man came nearer. He was dressed in a riding-suit and carried a short whip in one hand. As he came closer the bulldogs ran towards him in a friendly way.

"Say, do you know who he is?" asked Jack, suddenly.

“Who?” asked the others.

“Haverick, the horse-dealer—the man who owned the dog I shot while we were at target practice.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE OLD WELL

THE announcement the young major made was true—the man who had come up was really Sam Haverick, the horse-dealer, a fellow known far and wide around the lake for his sharp deals in horseflesh.

As soon as he caught sight of the cadets' uniforms his face took on a sour look.

"Are you youngsters from Putnam Hall?" he asked, as he came to a halt under the tree.

"We are," answered Pepper.

"How many of you up there?"

"Three."

"Humph! What are you doing there?"

"The dogs drove us up here," said Andy. Jack was purposely keeping in the background.

"As they are your dogs we would like you to call them off," continued Pepper. "They have kept us treed about long enough."

"I guess they know you," said the horse-dealer, with a scowl. "One of you cadets killed one of their mates."

"The mad dog," said Andy.

"He wasn't mad! He only wanted to have some fun. Say, why don't you show yourself?" shouted the man, to Jack.

As there was no help for it, the young major stepped out on a tree-limb in full view.

"Oh, I see now. You are Jack Ruddy, the lad who shot my dog. Ain't that so?"

"I did shoot the dog," answered Jack, boldly. "But I only did it because he was mad and because he wanted to bite Mrs. Bennington."

"Stuff and nonsense! You shot the dog because you thought it was smart!" growled the horse-dealer. "I ought to have had you locked up for it."

There was an awkward pause. The boys felt that they could expect anything but kind treatment from Sam Haverick.

"Are you going to call off the dogs?" asked Pepper, at last.

"I will—on one condition," answered the man, and there was a shrewd look in his face as he spoke.

"What's that?" asked Jack, although he knew about what was coming.

"That you pay for the dog you shot."

"How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Do you think we have fifty dollars with us?" cried Andy. "Why, I haven't but eighty cents."

"And I have sixty-five cents," said Pepper.

"I've got two dollars and a quarter," put in Jack. "But I am not going to give it to you," he added, with spirit.

"Humph! Then you can stay in the tree."

"We shan't do that either," said Pepper. "Call off those dogs and be quick about it. I am coming down, and if your dogs attack me, you'll go to prison for it."

"That's the talk," said Jack. "Call off the dogs, quick! Here I come!" And he started to drop down.

The horse-dealer was a good deal of a brute, but he was likewise a coward, and he did not dare to allow his dogs to attack the boys. As they came down out of the tree, he whistled to the bulldogs and they crouched behind him.

"Suppose you think you're smart," he growled.

"We are standing up for our rights, that is all," answered Jack. "Now we are going on our way. If those dogs come after us again, I'll get Captain Putnam to have you locked up for allowing such brutes at liberty."

"Oh, go to grass!" grumbled Sam Haverick, and strode off, with his dogs following him.

As he went in one direction, the boys thought it

wise to take the other. They continued on the road, and quarter of an hour later came in sight of a small farmhouse, perched on a hillside and surrounded with fields of grain.

"So you were really in that balloon!" said the farmer after he had heard their story. "Don't it beat all now! I wouldn't go up in one of them pesky things not fer a million dollars!"

"An' I wouldn't go fer three million," said his wife, who was in the kitchen baking.

The boys asked if they could purchase some lunch and were given some sandwiches, fresh cake, and all the milk they could drink. The farmer wanted no pay, but each cadet insisted upon giving his wife a quarter.

"This road will take you to Cedarville," said the farmer. "It's a long way around though. A short way is by the trail over yonder."

"Is the trail a good one?" asked Pepper, cautiously.

"You see, we don't want to lose our way again," explained Jack.

"I don't see how you can lose your way," answered the farmer. "Keep to the trail until you come to some tall rocks. Then turn to your left, go around the rocks, and you'll come out on the old Borden Road, which runs straight down to Cedarville."

"That looks easy enough," said Andy.

The three cadets soon set off, and in a few minutes the farmhouse was out of sight. They passed through a patch of woods, then across a meadow, and then followed the trail beside a tiny brook, which seemed alive with trout.

"This is the spot for fishing," exclaimed Pepper. "Don't I wish I had a line!"

"We can't stop to fish now," answered Jack. "Remember, the folks will be worried about us until we report."

"That is true. But we can come here some other day."

The trail left the brook a little further on, and then they came to a point where the way was uncertain.

"Go slow now," cautioned the young major. "We don't want to become tangled up if we can possibly avoid it."

"Here seems to be a cleared spot," said Pepper, gazing around. "I wonder if there was once a farm here?"

"If there was it must have been abandoned years ago," answered Andy. "To me it's a perfect wilderness."

They started to go on, when suddenly Andy sank down in the soil a distance of about two feet.

"Help!" he yelled, and scrambled out of the hole as quickly as he could.

"Humph! I wonder if that is another cave?" muttered Jack.

"I didn't seem to touch bottom," answered the acrobatic youth.

"Let us examine it, just for fun," said Pepper, and walked back before the others could stop him. He picked up a dead tree-branch and poked it into the hole.

"I can't touch bottom," he declared.

"You had better come away before you fall in," said Jack.

"Do you know what I think?" went on the Imp. "I think it is an old well."

"A well? out here?" came from Andy, with a skeptical look.

"Look for yourself."

Both of the others were now interested, and made an examination.

"It certainly is a well, and the top had been choked up most likely for years," declared the young major.

"I'll stick a tree-limb in the hole," said Pepper. "That will prevent somebody else from going down into it."

This was done, and they started to go ahead once more. They had covered only fifty feet

when Jack suddenly came to a halt as if electrified.

"Well, I never!" he gasped, after a look ahead and then a look behind.

"What's up now?" asked Andy and Pepper, in a breath.

"Do you remember Mr. Strong's story about that hidden pot of gold?"

"Certainly," said Andy.

"You don't mean——" began Pepper.

"Don't you remember that his great-grandfather left a letter, stating the pot of gold was hidden under the tree that had the stone in its roots,—the tree that stood twenty paces north of the old well?"

"Yes."

"Well, yonder is the old well, and here is the stone, about twenty paces north of it. The tree blew down years ago, but here is a part of the stump."

"And do you think the pot of gold is there?" almost shouted Pepper.

"That remains to be found out," answered Jack.

CHAPTER XXX

SOMETHING OF A FIND—CONCLUSION

THE discovery which Jack had made filled all three of the cadets with excitement, and they gazed at the rock and tree-root in wonder and expectation.

"Oh, I hope the pot of gold is really there!" cried Andy.

"We'll have to dig for it," returned Pepper. "Come on! I wish I had a spade."

"So do I."

"We'll have to use our knives and some sticks," put in the young major. "And our hands too."

They were soon digging away at the foot of the rock. Then they pulled away some of the rotten tree-roots that were near.

"Look out, there is a snake!" ejaculated Andy, a moment later. But the reptile was small and harmless, and quickly got out of sight in the bushes.

"I wonder if there are any more around," ventured Jack. He did not like snakes in the least.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open," answered Pepper.

Once more they made the dirt fly, loosening it with their knives and some sharp-pointed sticks, and scooping it away with their hands. They did not mind getting dirty—all their thoughts were on uncovering the pot of gold, if it was really there.

"This doesn't look like anything," grumbled Andy, after they had been digging the best part of half an hour.

"Do you want to give up?" questioned Jack, quickly.

"Not yet."

"Here is a flat stone," said Pepper. "It is quite large, too. We will have some trouble getting it up."

"Perhaps it is placed directly over the pot of gold," said Andy.

They worked all around the flat stone and then pried up one end with a heavy stick. Pepper placed his hand beneath.

"There is something under it," he announced. "Feels like an iron pot!"

"Let us get that stone up!" cried Jack.

They tugged and strained with might and main, and at last the flat rock came up out of the hole. Beneath was the cover to an old rusty

pot and beneath this the pot itself, resting in a bed of dirt and small stones.

"Hurrah! here it is!" cried Andy. "Bring it up, Jack!"

It was no easy matter to bring up the iron pot, which was heavy, but at last they had it out on the grass. The lid was rusted fast, but they speedily pried it off.

"Empty!" ejaculated Pepper, looking into the receptacle, and his face fell.

"All our work for nothing," murmured Andy.

"No, it is not empty," said Jack. "That is an iron plate resting near the bottom. Wait till I pry it up with my knife blade."

He set to work, and soon the iron plate came up. Beneath lay some dull yellow round pieces of metal.

"Gold!" shouted the young major. "Old English and Spanish gold!"

"Are you sure it is gold?" queried Pepper.

"Yes. Look for yourself," and Jack brushed off one of the pieces on his coat-sleeve. "Boys, we're in luck! We have certainly found the pot with gold in it that Mr. Strong has been looking for so long!"

"Not very much gold," said Andy. "I thought there would be a pot full."

"It doesn't take much gold to make quite a

sum, Andy. You know a ten-dollar gold piece isn't very large."

"That is true."

The boys inspected the pieces with interest and counted them up. All told there were four hundred and twenty-three pieces, some large and some small, English, French, and Spanish gold, as they made out by some of the tarnished markings.

"Let us take the pot and all along," said Pepper. "Mr. Strong will wish to see the whole thing."

"And let us mark this place, so we can find it again," added Andy.

They hung the pot with its contents on a stout stick, and two carried it at a time. Having marked the neighborhood, they set off along the trail, and after a rather tedious walk reached the highway running into Cedarville.

"I know where we are now," said Jack. "We needn't go all the way to Cedarville. We can branch off a little way below here and go directly to Putnam Hall."

They followed his advice, and half an hour later, just as the sun was setting, came in sight of the school. They were soon seen, and a shout went up.

"There are Jack, Andy, and Pepper now!"

"Did you get hurt on your balloon trip?"

"Where did you leave the balloon?"

"We were afraid you were all killed."

Such were some of the remarks and questions uttered by those who had returned to the Hall after the departure of the balloon with the boys.

"We are safe and sound," said Jack, speaking for himself and his chums.

"What have you got there?" asked Dale.

"Something for Mr. Strong," whispered Pepper. "Where is he?"

"In the Hall. Captain Putnam is out hunting for you. He said if you were found, to fire the cannon."

"All right, then fire it," said Andy.

The three boys marched into the Hall with their precious burden. They were told that Mr. Strong had gone to his room, and so followed up the stairs and knocked on the door.

"What! back, safe and sound!" cried the teacher. "I am more than glad to hear it."

"We are glad to be back," answered Jack.

"But what made you run off?"

"We didn't run off. We were carried off against our will."

"Well! well! I suppose—— What is that thing?"

"This, Mr. Strong, is something we suspect be-

longs to you," said Jack, proudly. "It is the missing pot of gold—only it isn't full by any means."

"The pot of gold? Surely I must be dreaming!" gasped the teacher. "Where did you get it?"

Their tale was speedily told in detail, and the gold was examined with much interest.

"It must be true," said George Strong. "What an extraordinary ending to an extraordinary adventure!"

Just then the cannon on the campus boomed out—the signal that the boys had returned to Putnam Hall.

The shot soon brought Captain Putnam back to the school, and he listened to the cadets' story with as close attention as had George Strong. He had already heard from Dale, Stuffer, Hogan, and Joe Nelson how the balloon had started away, and so could not blame the boys very much.

"It was imprudent for you to get into the basket," said he. "But as nobody was hurt, we will let it pass. But the balloonist wants his balloon back."

"He can have it, and welcome," said Jack. "After this I'll do my ballooning on the ground!"

"Ditto here," said Pepper.

"I rather enjoyed it," said Andy. "I'd go again—if I got the chance."

"Not while you are a pupil under my care," said Captain Putnam, decidedly.

On the following day the balloon was located by those who owned it and brought over to Cedarville, and on Monday the professor gave an exhibition to which Captain Putnam and his pupils contributed liberally. This satisfied Professor Aireo and he departed for parts unknown, and that ended the matter.

As soon as possible George Strong found out the value of the coins the iron pot had contained, and had the boys take him to the spot where the treasure had been located.

"The gold is worth exactly six thousand and two hundred dollars," said the teacher. "I shall divide it up with my relatives. The question is, What part of the sum do you think you ought to have for finding it?"

"We'll leave that to you?" said Andy, who was not overly rich.

"Would a hundred dollars each suit you?"

"That suits me," said the acrobatic youth, and Jack and Pepper said they were also satisfied. Later on each got the amount mentioned.

"Have you located those crazy men yet?" asked Jack.

"In a way, yes. They took a boat to Ithaca, and then a train for the north. Perhaps they have left the neighborhood for good." But in this statement George Strong was mistaken, as later events proved.

The balloon adventure made Andy, Jack, and Pepper the heroes of the Hall for the time being.

"We'll never have another adventure as thrilling as that," said Pepper, but he was mistaken; they did have an adventure equally thrilling, and what it was I shall relate in another volume of this series, to be called "The Putnam Hall Champions; or, Bound to Win Out." In that volume we shall meet all our friends once more, and likewise some of their enemies, and learn the particulars of a victory which led to a most unlooked-for discovery.

Summer was now at hand, and one bright Saturday the boys had a regular field-day, with a big spread afterwards. Jack, Andy, Pepper, and the others did very well, winning several prizes. Harry Blossom made a neat speech, and then all sat down to a meal which made Stuffer Singleton's eyes fairly glisten.

"This day is the limit!" cried Andy, while the eating was going on. "I was never so happy in my life before."

"I don't think any schoolboys could be happier

than we are," said Jack. "Especially with old Crabtree gone."

"Drop Crabtree," sang out Dale. "He will come back all too soon, don't fear!"

"Here comes Captain Putnam!" announced Pepper. "Let us give him a cheer."

All agreed, and the cheer went echoing across the lake and the hills far and wide, and with that cheer let us take out departure.

THE END

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